

Fact-File 3: Classroom Conversations... More than just *question-and-answer*?

Extracts from our *Conversational Coaching E-News* Issue #8: Learning Conversations

Conversations – the learning link

For most of us, our first formal exposure to conversational coaching was the classroom.

Those conversations your teachers had with you as a student probably had a lot to do with what you learned or didn't, how you felt about it as well as how this learning happened. Learning is, after all, a social activity. We interact with others while engaging in classroom activities – and the main medium is conversation.

- It's through conversations that we learn new concepts, connect with others, see new relationships, test out ideas, find meaning and extend our competence to use language to persuade, to analyse, to understand, to envisage and create – as well as to get what we want and control our environment..
- When you think of it this way, if students aren't taught basic conversational skills and tools, much learning will remain closed to them - not to mention the development of life skills, social skills and self-mastery.

When students enjoy the conversations they have in class, they feel connected, engaged in what's going on, curious and motivated – conditions which give them the best chance of being open to learning.

It wouldn't be exaggerating too much to say that conversational mastery and learning are closely linked. It may not be overstating it too much either to say that some student's lack of participation in classroom activities is related to their lack of confidence or competence in mastering the etiquette of classroom conversations.

Not all students learn the rules of the game, and not all teachers are skilled in how to run a real learning conversation with their students or know what and how to impart crucial conversational skills to children.

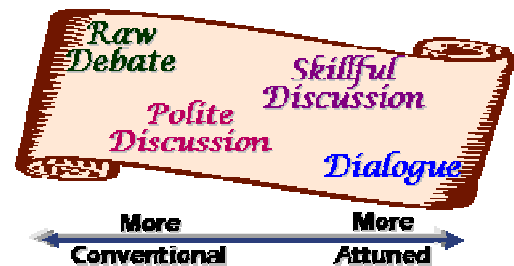
Conversations as learning scaffolds

Of course there are many teachers who talk about conversations as a *scaffold* for learning. It's a good metaphor.

- In building terms, a scaffold is an external structure bracing another one that's being built. It's precisely the role conversations play – they're a mechanism to shore up whatever's being learned.

- Much scaffolding great teachers use takes the form of classroom conversations – learning dialogues where teachers and students share their thinking and explore ideas together.

On the other hand, many teachers we meet at our Conversational Coaching Clinics end up admitting that they rarely see much evidence of real learning conversations in classrooms. It seems they're a pretty rare species, despite the pedagogical rhetoric around them.



Conversational Interrogations

If you think of classroom conversations in terms of this conversational continuum, with directive question-and-answer discussions on one end and real, learningful dialogue on the other, most classroom conversations in practice gravitate toward the interrogational. Why?

Well, we seldom question the well-entrenched cultural belief that instruction is knowledge transmission. The common tendency is to fall back on the old initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) conversational sequence, exemplified by question-and-answer type talk.

This style of conversation puts the teacher up front, dispensing information and having all the answers. And it leaves students in the role of passive recipients. Despite what some say to the contrary, that seems to be the way many like it!



Here's a couple of other reasons teachers have shared with us for why we see less real classroom conversation than we'd like to...

- Many teachers have trouble getting kids to talk at all (No – answering a direct question doesn't count) rather than just respond rotely to random Q&A type talk.

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- ❑ There's also a fear of losing control or deviating too far from the curriculum – 'What if the conversation goes in a direction I'm uncomfortable with?'
- ❑ Some say that a conversational learning approach takes up too much time – and more directive techniques are easier to time-manage, direct and get your message across
- ❑ Teachers, especially high-school, say they're there to teach a specific subject – and it sure isn't conversations! They're not on the curriculum and it's not assessed so why do it!
- ❑ A lot of teachers lack the confidence or conversational skills and tools to make the transition from information dispensers to facilitators of learning conversations.

Learning conversations are still seen as somewhat counter-cultural or anti-curriculum in many school contexts – even though they fit better with current ideas around student-centred, action-learning.



“The critical form of assisting learners is through dialogue, through the questioning and sharing of ideas and knowledge that happens in instructional conversations...To truly teach, one must converse, to converse is to teach.” Roland Tharp

Teaching through Conversations...

In 5 Standards for Effective Pedagogy, Roland G. Tharp traces a thread of conversational interactions and behaviours teachers need to engage in, culminating in his 5th Pedagogy – *Teaching through Conversation*. Here's a set of suggestions we've adapted from this:

- ✅ **Integrate conversational learning through all curriculum areas** – *yes, you can have a conversation about maths!*
- ✅ **Arrange classroom seating to encourage students to interact** and work jointly together – *even sardines hate sitting in straight rows!*
- ✅ **Model purposeful conversation** (eg. eliciting, probing, restating, clarifying, questioning) – *we all have to learn techniques for talking together!*

- ✅ **Respond meaningfully** – make those 'in-flight' changes to conversations that directly relate to students' questions and comments – *don't stick to the same old script – throw it out, then really listen and wing it by building on their meaning!*
- ✅ **Use conversations to link activities** in class with what student's already know outside it – *find the right 'relevance' hook to lure them into the conversation!*
- ✅ **Use conversations to connect** and find common meaning – construct lessons from common understanding of each others' experience/ideas – *make class-talk warm, personal, collaborative, reduce the distance between you and them*
- ✅ **Issue conversational invitations**, constantly. Make them safe, non-threatening (eg. *"Who's got another story like that? I'd love to hear more ideas on that!"*) – not anxiety-provoking (eg. *"Jim, what year did the first fleet arrive?"*).
- ? *Don't expect students to take up your invitation to include them first time – after all, how do they know it's safe?*
- ✅ **Value what students say** – don't label it as irrelevant, unclear etc, validate by restating, praising, encouraging (eg. *"I hadn't thought of that. That's cool, isn't it?"*) or expanding (eg. *"Tell us more about that!"*).
- ? *Do you shut down or open up class conversations?*
- ✅ **Use conversations to think about thinking** – Show students how to see assumptions and distinguish them from facts (eg. *"I wonder what facts would support that? What leads you to think that?"*) and model thought processes through think-or-talk-aloud's.
- ? *Do you want to teach students how to think or teach them how you think?*
- ✅ **Divert conversation from you to them** – most classroom conversations are teacher-centred. Students talk to you, not to others. Get cross-conversations going (eg. *Jenny, why don't you direct that question to others...*)
- ? *Do you want to be the centre of the conversation or get students centred on the conversation?*
- ✅ **Engage students in real dialogue** – practice the protocols of dialogue, show students how

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to express ideas, think together, build on each other's ideas and challenge each other respectfully – *don't talk down to students, make it safe to talk with them*

- ☑ **Create conversational artefacts** – show how conversations have a point by thinking of ways students can prepare physical learning artefacts or products as a result of talking (eg. lists, models etc). *Convert your conversations into concrete creations.*

Tharp says classrooms and schools can be “transformed into communities of learners” through learning conversations with these characteristics.

Of course, this means assuming students have something to say beyond the known answers in your head and who knows, you may even learn something from your students in the process!

Coaching in Conversation

Conversational Coaching is an exceptional personal development opportunity to help school management teams function more effectively and enhance your ability to sustain substantive conversations, interactive discussions and learningful dialogue – whether its the staffroom or the classroom.

The Change Forum conducts 2-day coaching clinics on **Conversational Coaching**® and **Master Classes on Dealing with Difficult Discussions**® for those who want to learn tools for enhancing conversations in all sorts of contexts. For brochures...

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🌐: www.thechangeforum.com/brochures

What people in education say about our **Conversational Coaching Clinics**:

“The active learning in this clinic was tremendous! A very effective, entertaining style of presentation. I gained some useful insights into my own conversational behaviour and the back-up materials are very valuable!” *Kathleen MacDonald, Head of English Tully SHS*

“The clinic allowed me to put theory into practice. The jig-saw of relationships now fits much better - and the guidebook is excellent!” *Ray Clarke Deputy Principal Sarina SHS*

“I had a great time. Very useful practice of real techniques. Overall - fantastic and definitely worth doing” *Karen Fainges - Teacher Mt Isa TAFE*

“I thoroughly enjoyed the clinic. The practical demonstrations kept everyone engaged and motivated. The methods used to demonstrate and explain the tools were uncomplicated and your scenarios were realistic. I've gained the tools and more importantly the confidence to initiate and handle conversations in complicated situations.” *Anne-Marie Chapman, Wide Bay Institute of TAFE*

“Absolutely brilliant! Conversational Coaching certainly gave me the confidence and conversational tools I needed. Several staff also noticed the improvement in communication in our department” *Amanda Bush, Mt Isa TAFE*

“Stimulating, intellectually challenging and the practical elements provided hands-on experience The art of conversation requires high levels of skills, insights into the human factor and certain risk-taking - this clinic provides the solid basis for making all of these elements work together effectively. Excellent coverage, excellent facilitator, excellent tools. Current, up-to-date and extremely useful.” *Lyn Mackay - Lecturer - JCU*



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