

# Fostering Academic Classroom Conversations



Schools are continually asked to integrate the development of skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and collaboration into teaching and learning. When grouped together, these skills are often referred to as 21st-century skills. The engagement of students in academic classroom conversations is required if educators are to develop deeper learning. Academic talk creates opportunities for students to practice skills, including the ability to express and defend positions, consider different points of view, and gather and evaluate evidence.

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Question-asking is an instructional method that can engage students in any content area conversation. Questions that have a single answer discourage student discussion once the accurate response is given. Asking students to retrieve information can also limit rich student conversation. The following question types can foster relevant and enriching academic conversations among students.

- **Scaffolded questions** increase student participation and lead students to engage freely and confidently in conversation about a topic. Students respond to a general question followed by multiple, specific questions. These follow-up questions may alternate between reflective and complex questions that connect the topic to their personal lives, increasing relevancy in learning. The scaffolding technique can be used with any of the following type questions.
- **Opinion-based questions** encourage students to form individual perspectives. Students must use examples based on background experiences, topics researched online, or texts previously read. Students respond to how and why questions, offering evidence to support shared information. Encourage students to use textual evidence to support their opinions or claims. Often students experience difficulty discussing an issue, as they typically think there are pre-determined or set responses.



- **Perspective questions** invite students to take a position on a situation or issue and offer justification for their viewpoints. Sharing perspectives enables students to think about and discuss different points of view, while learning to listen to and respect the opinions and arguments of others. When students are asked to discuss the perspectives of different characters, authors, or family members, students begin to determine and articulate actions they might take in similar situations. As group tasks occur, students can communicate and solve conflicts more effectively when they value the perspectives of others.

- **Problem-solving questions** allow students to work collaboratively to solve problems. Situations that exist in the real world can be shaped into problems promoting student engagement, ownership of learning, and authentic conversation. Students discuss thoughts and feelings, determining if they agree/disagree with others and stating why or why not. As solutions are created, students question each other to challenge and strengthen individual ideas and/or perspectives.

- **Evaluative questions** encourage students to make judgments. Based on personal beliefs, viewpoints, and individual knowledge, students are presented issues, situations, and topics from which they form and justify responses. Collaboration with others is invited, giving students an opportunity to change or add to their previous ideas and responses. Students must be knowledgeable as the supporting evidence offered for their judgments must be reasonable.

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Student conversations can be an excellent strategy for increasing motivation, fostering intellectual interaction, and building democratic discussion habits. Careful planning by teachers ensures that conversations maintain focus. Academic classroom conversations challenge learners to develop cognitive processes such as critical thinking, reasoning, and evaluative thinking while engaging in analytic discussions – all 21st-century skills that prepare students for college, the work force, and life.

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