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Spotlight on...Collaborative Conversations

The updated Maine Learning Results English Language Arts (ELA) standards for listening and speaking place an increased emphasis on students communicating effectively through oral language while also using collaborative conversations as a vehicle for building understanding. The first standard in the Speaking and Listening Strand conveys that students participate in collaborative conversations about age-appropriate, grade-level topics and texts with peers and adults to build on others' ideas and to express their own clearly and persuasively. While Maine's former ELA standards included listening and speaking standards, a key difference in the updated standards is the emphasis on student-to-student interactions that enable students to engage effectively with a wide range of people and to use those conversations as a mechanism for building collective understanding. So, what are collaborative conversations? Why are they important? What instructional strategies support collaborative conversations?

What are collaborative conversations?

Collaborative conversations are characterized by purposeful talk focused around topics and texts appropriate to the grade level and discipline. They are sustained discussions between students in which ideas are presented, defended, elaborated upon, and responded to. Collaborative conversations encourage exchanges of ideas, based on evidence, that generate new thinking and stronger understanding. Doug Fisher (2012) describes collaborative conversations as discussions in which students "argue without being argumentative and disagree without being disagreeable."

Why are collaborative conversations important?

Constructing meaning is a primary goal of collaborative conversations. Engaged dialogue helps learners build knowledge, increase vocabulary, and identify evidence to support thinking. Additionally, collaborative conversations lead students to making real-world connections and teach them how to dialogue in ways that enable ideas to develop. Peter Senge (2000) stresses that the employers of today place a high value on collaborative learning and thinking as tools for problem solving. Finally, collaborative conversations support reading and writing. If

"Conversation creates the conditions for us to rediscover the joy of thinking together."

~Margaret Wheatley



"By changing the way we talk, we change the way we think, not just as individuals, but all together."

~William Isaacs

you can talk about a topic, you can read and write about it. As James Britton says, “Reading and writing float on a sea of talk.”

What instructional strategies support collaborative conversations?

There are a wide variety of instructional strategies teachers can employ to promote collaborative conversations. The following list is by no means exhaustive, but may provide some helpful food for thought.

- Teach rules of discussion and model appropriate and inappropriate conversations. Model and expect use of complete sentences for responses. Encourage elaboration of ideas and multiple exchanges among students. Employ ample wait time so students feel comfortable thinking about their responses before sharing them.
- Use a variety of grouping patterns for conversations. Partnerships and small groups of four-six students provide more opportunities for all students to contribute.
- Provide many opportunities for students to engage in structured discussions about texts or topics of study. Be thoughtful about selecting rich texts and sources that lend themselves to collaborative conversations—sufficiently complex texts/sources that beg to be read/viewed multiple times are particularly well suited to collaborative conversations.
- Employ routines and protocols for collaborative conversations, such as “Think-Pair-Share,” “The Final Word” and “Give One, Get One.” Utilize routines that encourage and expect contributions by every student. Many examples of protocols for collaborative conversations can be found at the National School Reform Faculty’s website: www.nsrffharmony.org.
- Teach sentence starters or frames to help students learn to share their thinking, such as, “I believe _____ because...” “The facts that support my idea are.....” and “I think I hear you saying.....”
- Use graphic organizers and note taking strategies to help students collect their ideas prior to sharing. Encourage them to add to their notes as they engage in conversations.
- Chart ideas and questions generated during conversations and code by responder/contributor.
- Use techniques for students to analyze conversations, such as fish bowls, critiques of videos, and rubrics for reflecting.



Upcoming Events

Maine Department of Education Training Calendar

To explore potential training sessions that may be of interest, be sure to check extensive list of professional development offerings at:

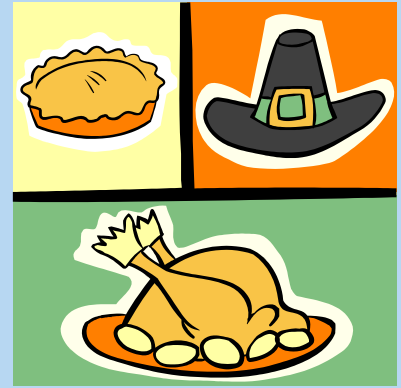
www.maine.gov/doc/calendar/



Read-Write-Think

www.readwritethink.org

This web-based resource is produced through a collaboration between the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. The site houses a huge collection of instructional resources, including lessons and strategies for promoting collaborative conversations. Enter the search term “conversation” in the search feature on the site to pull up lessons related to this topic.



“By giving our students practice in talking with others, we give them frames for thinking on their own.”

~Lev Vygotsky

Professional Texts

Here are two professional texts that contain information about incorporating collaborative conversations in classroom instruction.

Comprehension Through Conversation: The Power of Purposeful Talk in the Reading Workshop

by Maria Nichols
Heinemann, 2006

This text is a practical guide to fostering collaborative conversation. Building on the premise that productive dialogue about text and learning builds comprehension, Nichols demonstrates specific ways to use conversation as a scaffold to bridge prior knowledge to deeper understanding. Her ideas for conversations include lesson designs that use read-alouds and units of study that support children as they read progressively more complex texts.



Talk About Understanding: Rethinking Classroom Talk to Enhance Comprehension

Ellin Oliver Keene
Heinemann, 2012

In this new text, readers will delve into how to be more precise in the ways in which they utilize teacher talk and student talk to promote deeper understanding of both literary and informational texts. Included with this text is a DVD with video segments that feature Ellin Keene modeling the practices described in the text.

Children's Literature

This month we are featuring a couple of texts that lend themselves to collaborative conversations. *One Cool Friend*, encourages readers to predict and infer—skills that foster conversation among readers. *Island: A Story of the Galapagos*, entices readers to ask questions and search for answers, another great model for promoting collaborative conversation.

One Cool Friend By Toni Buzzeo

On a trip to the New England Aquarium with his eccentric father, young Elliot's request to have a penguin turns into a childhood adventure that leads to not only humorous events but to a strengthened relationship between a parent and a child.

Island: A Story of the Galápagos By Jason Chin

Have you ever wondered how life, like plants and animals, come to exist on an island? This detailed text describes the evolution and demise of the Galapagos Island—tracing a six million year span from its formation through a volcanic eruption, its growth as a home to unique species and finally its disappearance back into the ocean. Engaging and inventive, this informational text explores concepts of environmental adaptation and transformation.

For additional information about this edition email:
leeann.larsen@maine.gov

To view back editions:
<http://www.maine.gov/doe/ela/resources/literacy-links.html>

“The way human beings learn has nothing to do with being kept quiet.”

~Ralph Peterson

The Maine Department of Education's mission is to provide leadership and to collaborate with educators and learning communities in order to ensure that every learner has the opportunity to be successful.

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