

Academically Productive Talk in the Classroom

Each lesson in *Discussions4Learning* is designed to provide an **authentic, rich context for students to develop vocabulary and language skills** in the service of discussing engaging images and concepts. Through these discussions, students develop academically productive talk strategies that will serve them across the curriculum.

Images as Springboards for Engaging Discussions

The fine art images include a wealth of discussion topics including artist's intent, symbolism, cultural significance, universal themes, and observations from ancient to contemporary times.

The real-world photos are a rich source of discussion topics as well, as students explore concepts and images from around the world.

All of the images tie in to four overarching themes with connections to science and social studies, including Things We See and Use (physical sciences, matter, and objects), Our Living World (flora and fauna), Places and Spaces (habitats, ecosystems, and biomes), and Our Changing World (change in science and communities).

Academically Productive Talk Strategies

One of the goals of *Discussions4Learning* is to help students learn to listen to each other, respond to each other, and build on each other's comments and observations. These skills prepare students for academically productive discussions across the curriculum.

Each of these strategies is designed to help the teacher **move classrooms away from the traditional model of the teacher evaluating students' responses**. This traditional format has often been referred to as IRE (Initiate-Respond-Evaluate). In the IRE model, the teacher initiates a question, a single student responds to the question, and the teacher evaluates the answer.

The evaluation might include "good answer," which means that the answer is correct. Or it might include "nice try," which means that the answer is incorrect, and opens the classroom up to have another student try and respond correctly.

Discussions4Learning provides teachers with research-proven, highly effective strategies to move the classroom away from placing the burden of evaluating student responses on the teacher. In *Discussions4Learning*, students are encouraged to listen to each other, as they will be responding to each other's responses. We discourage the teacher from evaluating students' responses with comments like "good answer" or "nice try."

The Value of Whole-Group Discussions in Teaching Discussion Skills

Many teachers look to small group and peer discussions to move away from the traditional IRE model of teachers evaluating students' responses. We know from research, however, that in order for these discussions to be academically productive, it's important for students to learn the types of academically productive discussion skills that ensure that students are listening to each other and building on each other's comments.

The whole-group discussions in *Discussions4Learning* are opportunities for teachers to scaffold these skills. The **sidebars of each lesson include built-in professional development** to help teachers acquire some of the most successful strategies for fostering a classroom environment that supports academically productive talk. Teachers can first model these skills for students. Then, through effective scaffolding, students can use these same skills in their small group discussions.

The Role of the Teacher in Scaffolding Discussion Skills

The teacher has an important role in teaching students how to truly listen to each other and to ask important questions that lead to knowledge building. The following teaching strategies can help students learn to engage in academically productive discussions across the curriculum.

1. Intelligibility

Teachers can guide students in making themselves intelligible to others. Some students may need to learn to speak louder, other students may need help conveying what they're trying to say in language that is understood by their classmates.

Strategy: Revoicing by Teacher: The most powerful strategy for ensuring intelligibility is Revoicing. This strategy is included throughout the sidebars of *Discussions4Learning*. In **Revoicing**, the teacher begins by restating what a student has said in his or her own words. *"So let me see if I've got your thinking right. You're saying..."* Then it's important to check back with the student to allow that student to confirm if, in fact, that's what he or she meant.

This strategy has several benefits. It demonstrates to students that what they're saying has value, and that you want them to be understood. It also helps students learn to express their ideas more effectively.

Strategy: Revoicing by Students: Once the teacher has demonstrated Revoicing, the strategy should be taken on by the students themselves. *"Can you repeat what Lucia just said in your own words?"* So when Student A says something, Student B should revoice what Student A has said, and check back with Student A to make sure that what he or she said reflects what Student A meant. *"Is that what you meant?"* If Student A says that's not what he or she meant, Student B should ask Student A to restate what he or she meant until Student B has accurately captured what Student A was trying to say.

This is a very simple strategy, but it means that all students are focused on what any student is saying, as they are all responsible for understanding what their classmates are saying.

Strategy: Asking Students to Speak Louder: Intelligibility also includes speaking loudly enough for others to hear. Students should be encouraged to ask, *"Can you please speak louder?"* This again reinforces a classroom environment where students realize that it's their responsibility to speak loudly enough for their peers to hear them, and it's their responsibility to listen carefully to their peers.

2. Coherence or Rigor

The teacher models for students that an academically productive discussion requires that everyone be coherent and rigorous in their observations and insights. It is important for students to learn how to challenge a statement that is possibly incorrect in a way that does not feel as though it's attacking the person who made the statement.

Strategy: Challenging or Providing a Different

Example: For example, if the class is debating whether a particular image depicts a rural or urban scene, and one student states that it must be a rural scene because there are mountains, the teacher can use that opportunity to model for students how to help each other attain more rigor in their observations by asking that student and the class, *"Is that true in all cases? Is it true that mountains are only in rural areas?"*

Other questions that encourage students to attain rigor and coherence, include: *"Does it always work that way?"* And *"What about?"*

Even as adults, we can tend to think that we're being polite by not challenging someone's statement, even though we sense that it is incorrect or incomplete. The teacher can model for students how to challenge each other's statements rather than the person. In this way, students can apply these skills in small group and pair-share discussions.

The Role of the Teacher in Scaffolding Discussion Skills

3. Equitable Participation

We all have experienced classrooms where some students do most of the talking and other students do not participate. The teacher can employ several strategies to encourage equitable participation. These strategies can then be used by students in small group and peer group discussions.

Strategy: Agree or Disagree: One simple strategy is to ask students if they **agree or disagree with what a student has said**. “Do you agree or disagree?” “Why or why not?” This simple strategy again moves the teacher away from evaluating a given student’s response.

This simple question allows students to realize that it’s acceptable to agree or disagree with each other. Academically productive discussions often have differing opinions. The important skill is for students to learn to support their arguments with evidence and to learn to agree or disagree respectfully with their peers.

Strategy: Prompt Students for Further Participation Another simple and powerful strategy is to ask students to add to what a given student has said. So, for example, rather than evaluating if a particular answer is correct or incorrect, the teacher can simply ask, “Would someone else like to add on?” or “What thinking would someone else like to share with us?” This helps students realize that there is always more to say and that all students probably have an additional comment or insight about a particular image or topic.

Strategy: Wait Time Wait Time is crucial in fostering academically productive discussions. When students realize that they have the time to formulate a response, it gives them more freedom to take a risk and volunteer to respond or contribute. When a student raises his or her hand, the teacher should encourage the rest of the class to keep their hands down and to be formulating their own thoughts while they wait. Simply tell the student who raised his or her hand, “Take your time. We’ll wait.” or “Do you want more time?” or “Do you need some help?” This holds the class accountable for giving time to their classmates to formulate their opinions. It also gives each student the time to truly concentrate and to think about what he or she wants to say.

Strategy: Every Pupil Response The teacher can also foster equitable participation with simple strategies like asking for a thumbs up or thumbs down if students agree or disagree with a particular comment. These Every Pupil Response strategies allow all students to participate, even if they are still acquiring Spanish.

4. Explanations of Ideas and Opinions

The teacher can model the importance of having students explain their reasoning. This skill, like all the academically productive discussion skills, is critical to effective discussions across the curriculum.

Strategy: Asking Students to Explicate their Reasoning The teacher can create an environment where students realize the value of explaining their reasoning. Simple questions like, “Why do you think that?” or “How did you arrive at that answer?” or “Say more about that” encourage students to explain their reasoning and cite evidence in the image or other evidence to support their thinking. And, like all of the strategies, students should learn to ask each other these questions as the teacher releases responsibility to the students.

These simple yet powerful academically productive strategies are found throughout each lesson of *Discussions4Learning*. Students become active, energized participants in discussions and learn the types of strategies that they can use effectively across the curriculum in whole group, small group, and peer discussions.