



# Teaching Idea:

## Teaching *About* and *Through* Purposeful Talk

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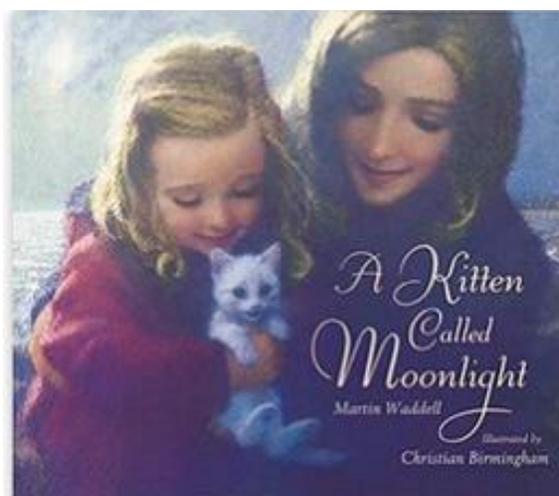
### Abstract

The author shares examples and suggestions for deepening students' ability to think critically and in depth as they explore ideas through listening and speaking purposefully to each other

I'm settled on the carpet with second and third graders, immersed in ideas nudged open by *A Kitten Called Moonlight* (Waddell, 2001). This gentle tale invites readers alongside a mother and daughter as they share yet another retelling of a favorite story—the moonlit evening a stray cat wandered into their lives. We had read the last page and tied up our thinking—or so I thought. As I attempted to move the group towards independent reading, Lawrence, who had hovered on the edge of our conversation, stopped me. “*But—*” he queried, a pensive look on his face, “Why did they tell it again?”

Throughout the read the students had been pondering the mother and daughter's retelling of their story and the closeness this ritual created, but clearly not to Lawrence's satisfaction. Tentative thinking still swirled in his mind, and he needed more time to talk. For Lawrence, this talk had a purpose: constructing bigger, bolder understandings than are possible inside a single mind. He

needed the perspectives of his classmates to push his thinking, along with extended time to engage and contemplate. This constructive reciprocal process is the essence of purposeful talk. Brian Cambourne (1995) reminded us of the power of this talk, asserting that “learning, thinking, knowing, and understanding are significantly enhanced when one is provided with opportunities for ‘talking one's way to meaning,’ both with others and with oneself” (p. 188).



Rupert Wegerif (2013) defined dialogic classrooms—classrooms that rest on a foundation of purposeful talk—as “places where teachers engage students in processes for learning *about* talk and *through* talk simultaneously” (p. 145). In *Comprehension*

*Through Conversation* (2006), I introduced talk behaviors that serve this dual purpose. These behaviors fall into three broad categories: Hearing all voices, growing ideas, and negotiating meaning. Let's unpack the behaviors a bit and consider our role in supporting students like Lawrence as they learn about and through purposeful talk.

## Purpose Talk Behaviors

**Hearing all voices.** Our classrooms are composed of a unique range of voices, each with different life experiences and different ways of viewing the world. Hearing from each of these voices matters, as this rich range of thinking is what helps us to construct big, bold meanings beyond those possible to one mind alone.

Yet students, like adults, have different patterns of participation. Some have no trouble adding their voices early and often, and we hear their thinking loud and clear, multiple times over in every conversation. Others, like Lawrence, tend to begin by wrestling with thoughts internally. Although silent on the outside, they have a conversation raging on the inside. Balancing these varied patterns of participation becomes the challenge.

**Growing Ideas.** To construct bigger, bolder understandings, students' energy needs to shift away from responding to right-answer questions towards openly exploring a rich range of thinking. A teacher might ask, "What are you thinking?" or "Is anyone wondering about . . ." to open conversation to tentative beginnings. Three critical abilities support efforts to grow tentative beginnings into fuller ideas.

1. **Saying something meaningful:**  
differentiating thoughts with potential to grow thinking from random notions that tend to pop into our heads, challenging our constructive intent.
2. **Engaging in purposeful listening:**  
thriving on purposeful talk, as students listen and expect to be listened to in

ways that have the potential to cause thinking to shift and grow—allowing this time to develop.

3. **Shifting away from surface level sharing:** keeping lines of thinking alive—pushing pause with a thought and taking time to wrestle with it, exploring it from different angles to deepen it as well as engage with disagreement.

**Negotiating meaning.** As students pursue lines of thinking, multiple theories and different perspectives may emerge. We slow down to push and pull between or among the possibilities, weighing the plausibility of each. At times one theory strengthens and eventually prevails. At other times students agree to disagree, their thinking broadened by the realization that multiple well-reasoned theories or perspectives are possible. And every so often a completely new way of thinking emerges from the process.



## Facilitation and Feedback

As with all process-oriented endeavors, teaching about and through purposeful talk is a continuous cycle of discussing talk behavior and goal setting, engaging students in authentic meaning making through that talk behavior, and offering actionable feedback. Discussing and goal setting help students to stand on what they've learned about the process of thinking and talking together and

to envision next steps. We may express a particular goal: “We’ve been noticing how much stronger our thinking is when we hear from lots of voices. How might we invite our quiet voices into the conversation today?”

As the talk starts, teacher facilitation is pivotal. Strong facilitation is responsive and flexible; it can’t be prescribed. It requires attending to the flow of talk, listening closely for tentative footholds for meaning making, and prompting for exploration of that tentativeness. Table 1 offers a glimpse of possible facilitative moves.

Actionable feedback makes students’ process visible by noticing and naming specifics about their talk, linking it to the meaning making that results. Sample feedback language is also included in Table 1. *Taking About Text* (Nichols, 2008) offers more in-depth thinking about goal setting, facilitation and feedback.

When learning about and through purposeful talk is a daily part of classroom life, students like Lawrence come to understand talk as a ready tool for learning, thinking, knowing, and understanding. As Ralph Peterson (1992) reminded us, “The way human beings learn has nothing to do with being kept quiet” (p. 3).

**Table 1**

*Suggestions for Facilitation and Feedback Based on the Three Aspects of Talk Behavior*

Talk behavior	A few possible facilitation moves	Sample feedback
Hearing all voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Diego, I noticed you shaking your head. What are you thinking?</i></li> <li>• <i>Let's draw in a few other voices with a turn and talk, and then we'll build bigger thinking all together.</i></li> </ul>	<p><i>When we saw Diego shaking his head, we asked him what he was thinking. That thinking helped us to look at the idea from a different direction. Noticing others' reactions and asking about their thinking can involve more individuals and more ideas in the conversation.</i></p>
Growing ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I wonder if this is one of those ideas that pop into our heads and get us thinking about something else? When that happens, we try to park it to the side and refocus.</i></li> <li>• <i>Did everyone hear Daniel's thinking?</i></li> <li>• <i>So you're agreeing? What's making you think the same?</i></li> </ul>	<p><i>When Emalyn realized she didn't really focus on Daniel's thinking, she paused and asked Daniel to repeat his idea. Noticing your own listening and "fixing it" if you need to is important.</i></p> <p><i>Emalyn really listened and had an ah-ha, which pushed everybody's thinking.</i></p>
Negotiating meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I'm hearing two different theories building. What might be causing the difference in thinking?</i></li> <li>• <i>Let's hold on to both of these ways of thinking as we read and talk more. Then we can think through each again.</i></li> </ul>	<p><i>Today we realized we were building two different ways of thinking about our topic. As we read, we paused and used new understandings to help us think more about both. And as we talked, a completely new understanding began to grow. When you hear differences in thinking emerge, be sure to listen and take time to explore each.</i></p>

## References

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*Maria Nichols' work focuses on the development of thoughtful teaching and learning in classrooms alive with talk. She currently supports educators and refines her own craft both in urban schools in the San Diego Unified School District and in districts across the United States. Maria is the author of several texts and articles, including Comprehension Through Conversation (Heinemann 2006), Talking About Texts (Shell 2008), Expanding Comprehension (Scholastic 2009), and most recently "Real Talk, Real Teaching," published in Educational Leadership (2014).*