

SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT

How Much Should Teachers Talk in the Classroom? Much Less, Some Say



By Catherine Gewertz — December 10, 2019 | Corrected: January 03, 2020 ⌚ 8 min read



Corrected: A previous version of this story misnamed an app teachers can use to analyze talk patterns. It is called TeachFX.

Additionally, an earlier version of this story used the wrong name for

an app developed by researcher John Hattie. Its correct name is Visible Classroom.

If you carried a stopwatch into your district's schools and sat quietly in various classrooms for a week, timing how much teachers talk and how much students talk, what would you find?

Are lessons dominated by teachers talking? Do students have a robust role in discussing what they're learning? Or are they mostly answering procedural or factual questions? Are teachers consciously monitoring how much they talk? Should they be?

Research and front-line teacher experience suggest they should be. And some teachers are using new tools like apps on their phones to help them reflect on their classroom talk habits.

Most educators agree that it's important for teachers to get students talking about what they're learning. Doing so can get students more involved and interested in what they're studying and help them understand it better. It can also yield valuable insight into what students need, and improve achievement.

"If you're talking all the time, how can you hear the impact of your teaching?" asked John Hattie, a laureate professor at the University of Melbourne in Australia who has analyzed research on "teacher talk." He's concluded that teachers should talk less and think more carefully about when they're talking and the kinds of questions they're asking.

Teachers who have experimented with changing the balance of student and teacher talk in their classrooms, and researchers who study it, say that simply shifting the ratio isn't enough. The real goal is finding ways to spark productive classroom discussions.

'Surface' and 'Deep' Stages

There are many ways to do that. Getting students to talk more about their learning means teachers must carefully plan lessons that include more open-ended questions. But before teachers can consistently do that planning, they must navigate a deeper shift. Educators who have revamped their classroom talk habits say they've had to reinvent their roles as tellers and become askers and listeners.

Instead of teacher calling on a few raised hands during discussion, try:

- Ask all students to engage
- Ask everyone to write their responses first
- Ask students to think about their response, pair with another student to discuss their answers, and then share in whole class discussion

Instead of having teacher's voice dominate discussion time, try:

- Student-led discussions
- Challenge yourself NOT to repeat, rephrase, or validate what students say
- "Can anyone build on that?", "Thoughts?", or "Do we agree? Disagree?"

Instead of teachers doing most of the reading, try:

- Get students to read and re-read
- Students read to themselves
- Partner reading
- Echo reading (you read, students repeat)
- Read passages as a group

Instead of teacher evaluating what's tricky and directing kids to strategies, try:

- Ask kids to self-assess and problem solve
- "What made this hard?"
- "What have you tried so far?" "What could you try?"
- "Re-read this page and circle words or ideas you don't understand."

SOURCE: Student Achievement Partners

"It's more than a collection of strategies. It's a mind shift," said Rosie Reid, an English teacher at Northgate High School in Walnut Creek, Calif.

Therese Arahill, an instructional coach in New Zealand, described that mind shift.

"I join their discussion, ... answering their questions," Arahill said via Facebook. "It's an attitude. Moving away from teacher ego, toward student voice, student agency."

Research documents the dominance of teacher voices in classrooms. Hattie's synthesis of studies on the topic, detailed in his 2012 book, *Visible Learning for Teachers*, found that teachers talk for 70 percent to 80 percent of class time on average. His own research produced an even higher average: 89 percent.

All that talking doesn't necessarily produce good learning. One study tracked middle and high school students and found their engagement flagged the most when their teachers were talking. Others show that most of teachers' questions seek lower-order responses like factual recall.

On the flip side, researchers have found that students' comprehension, engagement, and test scores improve when they get to discuss what they're learning. But research hasn't elucidated many details that could guide teachers, Hattie said, such as the right ratio of monologue to dialogue and how talk patterns might need to shift to suit students' grade level or the topic being taught.

Hattie's own studies, in classroom "labs" at his university, suggest that teachers should talk more as students are acquiring information and shift into a questioning mode as they're deepening their understanding, he said. He encourages teachers to split their lessons into "surface" and "deep" stages and plan distinct strategies for each.

Measuring and Analyzing

Many teachers start with the simplest piece: paying attention to how much they talk. Some are using a new app, TeachFX, on their phones or laptops to measure it. They click it open as class begins, and afterward, the app emails them an analysis of talk patterns, such as how much the teacher talked and whether he asked open-ended questions. Another app, Visible Classroom, designed by Hattie, offers similar tools.

Reid, who is California's 2019 teacher of the year, said TeachFX helped her spot a pattern she needed to change.

"I was talking at them too much at the beginning of class, when my students are at their freshest," she said. "I realized I need to use that time to do engaging warm-ups instead."

Jamie Poskin, a former English and math teacher who developed TeachFX as a Stanford University graduate student, said he's been surprised that teachers find the app so useful by itself, even without professional learning linked to it.

"They're telling us that just seeing the data profoundly affected their perspectives," he said. "They're shocked by how much they talk and how little their kids talk."

Once they see that feedback, Poskin said, they "unlock knowledge they already had" and start using it, such as deliberately including more open-ended questions in their lesson planning and making sure they extend the "wait times" between asked and answered questions.

One strategy Reid uses is to get students to reflect regularly on their own talking. She distributes what she calls "metacognitive cards" that the teenagers keep on their desks during class discussions. They make notes about things like whether they built on classmates' ideas or cited textual evidence and how much they talked. They evaluate their participation and set goals for improvement.

Finding New 'Moves'

An instructional coach from Hampden, Maine, Susan O'Brien, encourages teachers to do what she did with her 5th grade students when she was in the classroom. O'Brien used nine "talk moves" designed by two Massachusetts researchers to promote "academically productive" discussion.

To facilitate conversation, O'Brien rearranged her classroom so students sat in groups at tables. She taught them things to say in discussions to help them speak, listen, and build on one another's ideas, such as, "Let me see if I understand what you're saying" and "Can you say more about that?"

And she had to make another big change: She had to talk less and listen more. She started walking around the tables, eavesdropping on students' discussions.

"What I saw was that students started leading their own learning instead of having me up front doing sit-and-get," O'Brien said. "They were challenging each other and stretching their own thinking."

Cris Tovani, a literacy consultant and instructional coach whose 2017 book with researcher Elizabeth Birr Moje, *No More Teaching as Telling*, explores ways to reduce teacher talk, said that one of her favorite strategies for promoting good classroom discussion is using a simple chart she developed to record her observations as students discuss what they're reading, in small groups or as a whole class. She calls it "the discussion catcher."

In one section of the chart, teachers can jot down quotes or interactions they see that reflect good discussion, like one classmate helping another understand something, and share them later with students. Teachers can also use the chart for their own planning, noting areas of misunderstanding that could use a follow-up mini-lesson.

Revising the kinds of questions she asked, and waiting longer before providing answers, were important changes Tovani made in her classroom as she tried to get more students talking, she said. When students made comments, she'd "toss the ball back to them" with responses like, "Why do you think that?" or "Tell me more."

"Teachers hate wait time, but kids hate it more," she said. Talking about ideas together, rather than quickly resolving a question with a "right answer," produced more complex, interesting discussions, she said.

A Colorado high school history teacher, Lucas Richardson, came up with six strategies to build meaningful student talk in his class. A big one, he said, is asking questions that aren't designed to get a predetermined answer but instead aim to offer insight into students' thinking.

Whose Voice?

Richardson likes to start class with students' voices, staging 90-second "micro debates" about controversial topics. He restricts himself to no more than 10 minutes of talk at a time in his 70-minute class periods. He also has students do more ungraded writing in class, he said. That allows them time to think about what they want to say and is especially helpful with quieter students, he said.

A 2017 project called "Who's Doing The Work?," inspired by the book of the same name by teachers-turned-consultants Jan Burkins and Kim Yaris, explored a variety of strategies designed to get students talking more and got strong, positive results: After only six weeks of using those strategies, 90 percent of the teachers who participated reported that they talked less and their students were more engaged.

Led by Student Achievement Partners, which provides instructional coaching, several small groups of elementary teachers tried to expand students' own leadership in their learning. Instead of preteaching before children read a text, they'd let them read—or they'd read aloud to them if they were young children—and then ask questions like, “How did you figure that out?” Before correcting wrong answers, they tried using open questions like, “Is that right? How do you know?”

Teachers in the project also worked to downplay their own talk and facilitate discussion among students. They used such prompts as, “What do you think? Agree, disagree, or add on,” and “Let's hear from three more people and decide if we agree.” Instead of calling only on students who raised their hands, they tried asking everyone to write their responses down before a discussion began.

Responding to the survey after the project, one teacher said that “students are doing more of the thinking” with the new strategies. Another videotaped herself teaching before and after the project, and the second video showed “more students were contributing, thinking, and tracking” what their classmates said.



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