

# *Talking* About **Text**

*Guiding Students to  
Increase Comprehension  
Through Purposeful Talk*



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Foreword by Peter Johnston, Ph.D.



**SHELL EDUCATION**

# Table of Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	5
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	7
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	9
Purposeful Talk: What Is It, and Why Do I Need It in My Classroom? .....	12
The Changing Role of the Teacher .....	14
Defining Goals .....	15
Navigating This Book .....	16
<b>Chapter 2: Getting the Talk Started: Lessons That Teach Purposeful Talk Behavior</b> .....	19
Building Beginning Talk Behavior .....	21
Determining the Lesson Focus .....	23
Lesson Design .....	24
Using the Lessons .....	27
Focus Questions for Deconstructing Lessons .....	29
Lesson 1: Purposeful Talk Behavior: Hearing All Voices. .30	
Classroom Context .....	30
Lesson Plan .....	32
Lesson Narrative .....	34
Deconstructing the Lesson .....	36
Lesson 2: Purposeful Talk Behavior:	
Say Something Meaningful .....	38
Classroom Context .....	38
Lesson Plan .....	40
Lesson Narrative .....	42
Deconstructing the Lesson .....	44
Lesson 3: Purposeful Talk Behavior: Listening with Intent and Keeping Lines of Thinking Alive .....	46
Classroom Context .....	46
Lesson Plan .....	48
Lesson Narrative .....	52
Deconstructing the Lesson .....	54
Lesson 4: Purposeful Talk Behavior:	
Negotiating Meaning .....	56

Classroom Context . . . . .	57
Lesson Plan . . . . .	58
Lesson Narrative . . . . .	62
Deconstructing the Lesson . . . . .	65
<b>Chapter 3: Creating Habits of Mind: Lessons That Teach Students to Read, Think, and Talk Independently . . . . .</b>	<b>67</b>
Creating Independence Using the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model . . . . .	68
Informative Feedback . . . . .	69
Shared Reading . . . . .	70
Lesson Plan . . . . .	74
Lesson Narrative . . . . .	78
Guided Reading . . . . .	80
Partner and Independent Reading . . . . .	83
<b>Chapter 4: Maintaining the Momentum with Purposeful Talk . . . . .</b>	<b>93</b>
A Focus on Purposeful Talk Slips Away . . . . .	94
Slipping Back into the “Right Answer” Paradigm . . . . .	95
Community Difficulties . . . . .	95
Partnership Woes . . . . .	96
Talk Dominators . . . . .	98
Shy Students . . . . .	99
Who’s in Charge? . . . . .	100
Length of Conversations . . . . .	101
<b>Chapter 5: What Can Be . . . . .</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Appendix A: Planning Form for Teaching Purposeful Talk Behavior to Support the Construction of Meaning—Lesson Plan Template . . . . .</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>Appendix B: Planning Form for the Release of Responsibility for Thinking and Talking About Texts—Lesson Plan Template . . . . .</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>References Cited . . . . .</b>	<b>110</b>

## Introduction

“I just don’t know,” Katie sighed. “We’ve been working on talk behavior for over 10 weeks now, and I still have to remind the kids to speak to each other and not to me, and they still aren’t really listening to each other—at least, not all of them. Maybe I’m doing something wrong?”

I’ve honestly lost count of how often I’ve heard variations of those same words, with the same long sigh attached each time. Teaching students to use talk purposefully in an academic setting takes time. We are teaching students to interact in extremely focused ways in an environment where many have become quite passive. We are also asking them to use this behavior in conjunction with newly learned cognitive processes, or ways of thinking, in order to better understand complex texts, ideas, and issues. This is an awe-inspiring range of considerations for students—or anyone, for that matter—to orchestrate at one time.

“Tell me about the progress your students *have* made,” I encouraged, knowing full well that Katie Crommer, the classroom teacher, had much to celebrate.

“Well,” Katie hesitated, eyes upward, clearly envisioning her third graders in her head. “They don’t get frustrated anymore when I won’t confirm whether their thoughts are right or not. They understand that they need evidence for their thinking, and they’re getting that they need to talk about their ideas with each other to figure out if the thinking is on track. So their meaning making has become stronger. And some students are actually responding to what others have said when they talk, but they still

look at me instead of at each other when they talk. And then there are the kids who still just sit there....”

As I listened to Katie, I knew that this was amazing progress in just 10 weeks—not only for the students, but for Katie, too. Just four months ago, when Katie and I first began working together, she was struggling with shifts in her beliefs about students’ capacity for understanding, the use of talk as a tool for constructing meaning, the importance of building habits of mind, and her role in the process. Katie’s evolving beliefs required her to make huge shifts in her instructional practices, such as changing her purpose and technique for questioning. Now, she encourages the exploration of ideas as opposed to quizzing for right answers, and she orchestrates talk as opposed to confirming those answers.

Like anyone who is relearning a behavior, from perfecting a golf swing to improving snacking habits, Katie experiences temporary lapses into her old practice. But not to worry—her students are developing abilities alongside her, and both she and the students are working to strengthen these abilities in surprisingly supportive ways. Just the day before, during a read-aloud, I had watched Katie excitedly yell, “Right!” after a student shared his thinking about a big idea in a text. Then, with her hand waving madly in the air as if to erase the word (and an “I know!” look shot in my direction), she regrouped and was about to ask, “What makes you think that?” But Justin beat her to the punch!

“Why do you think it’s right?” he asked with a look that indicated he disagreed, but was willing to listen.

Katie smartly smiled, explained her thinking, cited evidence, and asked Justin, “What do you think?”

And isn’t that just what we want? We want the students to actively seek our explanations and evidence, as well as recognize that there may be alternative possibilities as meaning is constructed. In this instance, Justin was actually taking over the role of orchestrating the talk!

Katie’s developing awareness of the power of students’