



Turn and Talk: One Powerful Practice So Many Uses

In the USA and Canada educators agree that robust student academic discourse is vital for deep learning. It is also a practice we see far too little of in many classrooms. Standards for all academic areas emphasize the ability to communicate ideas; articulate reasoning, and listen respectfully to other perspectives as critical life skills no matter what the domain. Research from around the world validates the importance of dialogue as a key avenue for learning content with understanding and developing reasoning, social skills, and intelligence (Alexander). Whether students are learning a second language, have language processing issues, come from impoverished backgrounds, or are highly verbal upon entering school, all are expected to be able to engage in discussions using academic language and eventually write in the content areas using appropriate terminology and sentence structure. Various researchers (e.g. Reeves, Allington, Vygotsky, Alexander, Resnick) have linked academic success with the capacity to engage in conversation and to ask and answer questions in full sentences.

Many teachers simply do not yet know how to engage students in robust discourse that develops language and the capacity to reason in the content area. We have been studying classroom talk for many years and in many settings at all grade levels K-12 and have learned to name specific moves teachers can make to engender higher levels of student talk. There are several useful moves. However, we think there are some very basic, early moves, all teachers can learn to use fairly quickly and regularly no matter what their present skill level, academic expertise, or grade level. One of the most powerful and easy to implement moves we call turn and talk. It has also been referred to as think, pair, share, or partner talk. All of these are variations of a practice that has far reaching benefits for students. Simply defined, “turn and talk” is a teacher offered opportunity for students to turn to another student and talk something through for a very brief period of time before whole group discussion or lecture resumes. We have identified at least ten situations in which turn and talk is an appropriate pedagogical move and explain each one below.

To effectively employ “turn to your partner and discuss...” as a frequent and useful talk-move, many teachers would need to rethink their instructional pace. Presently many of us are clock driven—we may have five to seven minutes to launch a lesson; 20-25 minutes for students to work; 10-15 minutes for students to present their work; a few minutes for the teacher to summarize—or some variation of this scenario. Turn and talk requires a shift from pacing based on time constraints and mechanistic formats to pacing based on cognitive demand and student engagement. It keeps student meaning making at the center of the lesson and slows down the rapid-fire explanations and questions by teachers. It enables students to provide more thoughtful responses. The lesson is no longer driven by the clock, but by the depth to which students are willing and able to think critically and engage in discussion about important ideas.

When attempting to get students to talk to one another about content, the quality of the content in the lesson becomes apparent. You cannot talk about “nothing.” When the grain size of the lesson is too small, too factual or too skills based, there is nothing for students to discuss. Most lessons we observe are too focused on small bits and pieces of information, a lot of which many of the students already know, rather than on issues, big ideas or essential questions. Literacy lessons are often lessons in practicing reading or writing techniques rather than true studies of literature, genres, authors or media. Math lessons are often opportunities to practice procedures and skills rather than problem solve. Many students only exposure to science and social studies is what’s written in a textbook. To think deeply about content, there needs to be rich content to think about—puzzling,



problematic, stretch-to-understand content—which can authentically surface disagreements, skepticism, confusion, belief systems, misconceptions, questions and so on. Turn and talk can cause teachers to have to rethink their lesson (and unit) design to ensure that lessons are cognitively demanding and challenge students to consider important, complex, questions and issues germane to the content domain.

For some teachers, a significant shift away from teaching as the dissemination of information, is required if the ratio of student to teacher talk is to increase. For students to share their ideas with their teacher and classmates on how something works, why a war was fought and whether war is ever moral, how to solve a mystifying mathematics problem, or argue for the merits of a particular character in the historical novel; then teachers have to refrain from doing these things for students and invite students to share their ideas and to think critically about the ideas and opinions of others.

Partner talk is a safe place for students to consider one another's ideas, articulate their own thinking, question shaky reasoning, and prepare to participate in a whole group discussion. To use turn and talk effectively, teachers have to tell less to and ask more of their students.

Benefits of Turn & Talk

1. Provides a safe space to practice sharing ones thinking.
2. Develops the capacity to listen to others.
3. Develops the ability to think about what one knows, and to articulate ones ideas in ways that other people can understand.
4. Develops the ability to ask questions to deepen one's understanding of what is being discussed.
5. Develops capacity to articulate an idea using new terminology.
6. Develops confidence in ones own voice.
7. Develops a learning environment in which all students are expected to participate and scaffolding is provided to ensure they do.
8. Gets at least 50 per cent of the students talking in a given lesson.
9. Can be used quickly, frequently, in any content area, at any grade level.
10. Students get better at engaging in reasoned discussion in general which is an important life skill.
11. Keeps meaning making at the center of the lesson.

Ten Clues that Indicate It's Time to Turn and Talk

1. Agree/disagree/not sure. Whenever there is a disagreement in the air, it is likely a good time for students to turn to a neighbor and take a stand. Students should be instructed to vote at the count of three in the following manner--thumb up/agree, thumb down/disagree, thumb sideways/not sure (or use the clickers that are now part of some technology resources used in some schools). It is important to have individuals vote simultaneously and individually to minimize being influenced by others. It is also important to include, "not sure" as an option to validate that it is okay to not know. In addition, if some students are not sure, they can now be the people to whom those with opinions address their reasoning in order to "convince" those who are on the fence of their point of view. This gives an active role to all students and develops the capacity to "argue" respectfully and use reasoning to convince others. It changes the norm from "the teacher is the source of answers" to "reasoning, thinking things through, gathering evidence, etc." is the source of



finding answers or having informed opinions. It also helps students realizing that having an opinion before one has enough information or understanding is not what thoughtful people do.

2. Digest an idea that is under discussion. One of the critical features of classes that engender robust student discourse, is that the pace of the conversation is slower, more methodical, and deeper than the usual Ping-Pong pace of most classroom talk. In most classes the teacher asks questions in rapid-fire succession and bounces from one student to another (usually those whose hands are raised). Each student answers the question in a word or phrase, with little follow-up or probing by the teacher for further explanation from the student. Once an answer is given, the teacher often moves on to the next question. Rarely does the teacher check for understanding of the other students. The practice seems to suggest that as soon as the “right answer” is stated, it is assumed everyone understands and we can fly through more information.

In contrast, classes in which big ideas or essential questions are under discussion, there is a different dynamic. Usually the teacher is attempting to keep one main focus on the table and get several students to think aloud about the topic. In order to develop students’ capacity to think aloud in a whole group, the teacher can highlight the idea on the table, and ask students to turn to a neighbor and “explain” the idea to one another to ensure that all students are thinking about the concept at hand. If a student cannot explain the idea being discussed during the turn and talk, that’s okay because there will be a whole group talk in which the student will have another opportunity to hear the idea. The expectations are focused on engagement which is central to meaning making. How much of what has been presented do you understand? Do you have questions you could pose to help you understand more deeply? This practice holds a high-expectation that *all* students can in fact learn important ideas.

By getting students to explain an idea to each other, they come to see what they do understand and what they have questions about. Then when the whole group reconvenes, all students can either explain the concept or ask a question about it. Learning to ask clarifying and probing questions is a high-level metacognitive skill needed for both critical and creative thinking.

3. Explore an Idea Without Expectation of Mastery: When a major idea comes up or a child puts forth a conjecture or generalizes beyond the specific example under discussion, it is helpful to use turn and talk as a barometer to see which students are making sense of the idea. In this instance, pair talk is used to explore an idea that may initially be beyond the understanding of most students. Although pair talk gives students an opportunity to examine an idea; it is not expected that all children will master the idea under discussion by the end of the turn and talk. Because some ideas are beyond immediate understanding for the entire group, the whole group discussion that follows turn and talk will help more students understand and if the idea is big enough or the question really essential posing the question or posting the idea as a conjecture and returning to it over time is more likely the way that deep understanding will be facilitated..

4. Time to rehearse prior to sharing. Teachers can prompt students to think about an idea or problem, or make a hypothesis or conjecture and share their idea or thinking with a neighbor in preparation for a discussion to be held with the whole group. This move can develop self-confidence because it allows for some reflection and practice in articulation in relative safety before having to expose ideas in a large group. This move can also ensure that more students will have more to say because they have had a chance to think before engaging in a whole group dialogue.

5. Gathering prior knowledge. When launching a unit, new topic, new vocabulary, or examining a word problem prior to solving it, students can be asked to think about what they already know



about the topic and then turn to a partner and make a list of all the things they know. When the whole group reassembles, a collective class list can be created from the partner talk more rapidly and with more students' input than if this process is just done as a whole group activity from the start.

6. Wondering. Learning to ask questions is a critical life skill and one students seem to engage in less and less the longer they are in school. When a new topic is introduced, students can be asked to turn to a partner and make a list of questions they have about the new topic. Again, this rehearsal time with a partner gives students who are more reticent to talk in a whole group or who lack confidence or questioning skills a chance to engage in a low-risk manner. In addition, if they are carefully paired with students who are a bit more verbal than they are, they can hear a few questions that might jar some of their own. In the worse case scenario they can contribute one of their partner's questions to the whole group discussion. While some may argue that this is not developing the capacity of the reticent student, we would disagree on the grounds that having something to contribute (e.g. speaking a question in a full sentence to a whole group) is likely to be more of a contribution than the student would have made without the scaffolding. With enough practice and encouragement, shy and second language students contribute more and more of their own ideas--first in the pair and later in the whole group.

7. Preparing to write. We are often able to verbalize before we are able to write. When an idea has been discussed for some time and the teacher wants students to write their own definition or explanation of the concept that has been under discussion, it is sometimes helpful for students to turn to a neighbor and say in words what they might write prior to writing. Students could then write down their response. Partners can exchange papers and help one another improve their written work by reading the written responses out loud for meaning. Often the process of reading aloud exposes left out words or incomplete thoughts and students can self-correct as a result. Partners can also offer each other suggestions for improvement. This process can be tried in a fishbowl format before requiring students to try it on their own.

8. Teaching each other. When an idea comes up for discussion and only some of the students seem to understand the concept, it may be time to turn and talk. If students are seated in groups of four, then through a show of hands look to see if at least one student in each group has some grasp of the concept; if students are in pairs, then through a show of hands you are looking for approximately half the group to have some sense of the idea under discussion. A teacher can find this out very easily by asking the question: "Who understands what we are talking about well enough to explain it to someone else?" If just a few students respond in the affirmative, then have one or two students who do understand explain the idea again to the whole group and ask for another show of hands. After hearing the idea again, more students may now be ready to explain the idea to a partner. This sends a strong signal that everyone can and is expected to make sense of important ideas under discussion.

9. New language. When you want students to try out new vocabulary, you can have them explain the meaning of the word to each other in their own words. You can have them turn to a partner and use the word(s) in a sentence or story.

10. Deer-in-headlights response. When you ask a question and your students look at you like deer in headlights, assuming it is a well-phrased question, give students a moment to think--think time--(at least 10 seconds) and then have them turn to a neighbor and see if they can together come up with an answer to the question. Then resume a whole class conversation about the question.



Pitfalls In Facilitating Turn & Talk

Mistakes that teachers make when they first begin using turn and talk include:

1. Giving students too much time to talk. Turn and talk is short, lasting about 30-90 seconds depending on the meatiness of the topic. If it goes on too long, it can lead to students talking about irrelevant topics and to misbehavior. (Longer periods of talking to a neighbor are beneficial when you want students to grapple with an idea; discuss various perspectives of an issue or dive deeply into dissecting a problem. However, perhaps it would be helpful to give these types of discussions a different name—sustained discussion or “mini dives” or something that indicates that students will be given a substantive amount of time to think and discuss a question in depth. The teachers role and purpose in these types of dialogues differs in the sense that the teacher may actually engage with specific groups during the discussion, take notes on what students are saying and use those notes to orchestrate a whole group discussion or informally assess students.)

2. Asking students to talk about nothing. In order to have a successful turn and talk, there needs to be something worth talking about. The topic needs to be one that might generate disagreement; needs to be unpacked; is a bit confusing; might stretch someone’s thinking.

3. Not making your expectations clear. It is important to clarify what students are expected to do during a turn and talk. Students who are not used to engaging in this practice need specific examples of what turn and talk looks, feels and sounds like. For example, “I want you to turn to a neighbor, tell your neighbor whether you agree or disagree with what was just said and why. Give at least one reason for your thinking. Then listen to your neighbor’s opinion and reason. I’m going to call on someone to tell me what their neighbor thinks. Go.” You might also tell them what signal you will use for them to stop talking to their partner and turn their attention back to the whole group.

4. Getting Sucked into individual conversations and losing the timing. In an effort to hear what students are saying and perhaps know whose idea to highlight, teachers often listen in on conversations. The problem occurs when they actually engage with a pair of students and get involved in the conversation, rather than just listening in. The exception to just listening in might be when you notice that two students are not talking to each other. In that event, then it is helpful to touch base and give them a little nudge to help them get started. As soon as they do, walk away and let them talk.

Tips for Facilitation

1. Set clear expectations.
2. Observe the process as students engage in it and give descriptive immediate feedback in relation to the process. For example, “I notice that now everyone is turning to look at their partner during turn and talk. That’s a real improvement. The next thing we need to work on is making sure both partners get a chance to speak.”
3. Circulate quickly to “eavesdrop” on one, two or three groups, but do NOT linger or engage in the conversation with those groups. Select one of the groups you overheard to start the whole group conversation based on what you want to highlight.
4. Keep it short—about 30-90 seconds.
5. If there are pairs that consistently do not talk, then go directly to that pair as soon as the class is in think/pair/share mode, and jumpstart the conversation with the pair you have identified as not participating. You can jumpstart by restating the question and asking one



of the students what they think. Turn to the other student and say, "What do you think about what was just said?" Do NOT say things like, "You weren't listening." Instead repeat the question or directions and sincerely ask the students to tell you what they think. If that doesn't work, ask the students if they are confused or uncertain and then probe their confusion. Tell this pair that you expect them to listen to the other students' ideas when you bring the group back together and then you are going to ask them again what they think. This gives them a clear expectation and a heads-up. It holds the standard high and encourages them to participate.

6. Do NOT lose sight of the whole group, in terms of timing when eavesdropping or interacting with individual pairs of students. It's better to leave them wanting to say more to each other than having them run out of things to say and start talking about other things or getting distracted.

Some version of turn and talk is often used in literacy lessons, yet teachers rarely transfer the practice into mathematics or science or social studies classes. It is an essential practice that should be used in any content area and at all grade levels. We use it often when working with adults. We hope we have laid the foundation for using this powerful move in all content areas and many times throughout the day. This practice is the beginning of building academic discourse among students of any age and in any setting.

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