Fostering Speaking Across the Room, Across the Curriculum

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Abstract
While secondary educators worry about covering content in the face of preparing for standardized testing, best practice methods that provide students with opportunities to speak in the classroom may fall to the wayside. Rieman describes landmark and current research that support the use of speaking in the classroom, delineates professional standards that promote speaking, and provides specific methods and examples that may be used across the curriculum to foster student engagement. Methods described include discussion webs, Intra-Act, Save the Last Word, grand conversations, and informal debates.

The Background
It’s a typical day in our secondary reading and language arts methods course at Carthage College. The math, biology, history, and English majors, all juniors or seniors minoring in secondary education, are enthusiastically discussing the pros and cons of the methods I’ve been showing them. They always, always have questions about practicality and implementation, and today’s topic of fostering speaking across the curriculum is no different.

For this week’s classes, I’ve shared with these preservice teachers a number of research-based methods for structuring discussions of novels, expository texts, content area topics, and personal experiences. “Okay, these are all well and good,” says Jerri (pseudonym),” but in my clinical I’ve watched the students when they’re supposed to be working in small groups. All they do is take advantage of the chance to sit around and gossip and plan for things outside of school!” Another student comments, “Yeah, and how are we supposed to grade them on this, anyway?” Great critical thinkers, these future exemplary educators—they are already thinking about classroom management and assessment!

Flash backwards to just a month earlier when I presented the same lecture and activities to a group of educators at the Wisconsin Council for Teachers of English state conference. With a conference theme of English…For a Change! I shared the methods and principles for incorporating speaking across the curriculum within a framework of teaching students to understand and express both sides of issues, learn to agree to disagree, support their opinions with facts, and, most importantly, listen respectfully with open minds and open hearts. The inservice and preservice teachers who attended this session participated willingly in the sampling of activities, asked the same sorts of questions posed by my undergraduates, and added, “But how can I make time to do these things?” The question that immediately leaps to mind is, “How can you NOT?!”
Research and Recommendations

In a review of professional literature on the topic of fostering speaking across the curriculum, a great variety of reasons to do so were identified. Of course, the most obvious reason to incorporate speaking is the fact that speaking is a language art (http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Books/Sample/StandardsDoc.pdf, retrieved 6-29-2010), and as such, should be taught as a skill and integrated across the curriculum. Across decades, even across centuries, educational psychologists and theorists have noted the increased learning that takes place when students interact with one another in cooperative or collaborative learning groups before, during and after learning new information and skills. According to John Dewey, schools are social institutions created to foster education as a social process (1929). As Lev Vygotsky pointed out in his landmark text Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes (1978), children’s cultural development occurs first on a social level between people and later on an individual level, or inside the child (Vygotsky, 1978).

In more contemporary works, authors have delineated the benefits of fostering speaking in the classroom. One of the greatest values of literature circles is the opportunity for students to discuss their texts in supportive, intimate settings (Daniels, 2002).

When adolescents discuss their writing, simply talking before writing a first draft helps them hone their thoughts. This socialization helps writers in pre-writing to analyze, elaborate, question, and justify their thoughts. Additionally, speaking about writing after completing an assignment gives students opportunities to share their efforts and to enjoy hearing about the positives of each final piece (Farris & Werderich, 2010). Social inquiry-conversation is the term that literacy trainer Ann Ketch uses to describe what happens when learners begin to understand their work and begin to discuss that understanding. According to Ketch,

“Conversation and simultaneous reflection, using the cognitive strategies, are a critical part of comprehension for most of us. Feedback from conversation helps us form a new idea or support or reject an original idea. Internal inquiry can proceed from, accompany, or follow social inquiry. The conversation and thinking become more complex as the discussion continues because of the different viewpoints of others.

These viewpoints are forged into new or solidified thinking by conversation. We learn through discussion, and it molds our thinking. Our growing body of knowledge is forever changed after such conversations” (Ketch, 2005, p.10).

In other words, talking about what we are learning deepens the learning and creates an endless chain of reflection and new learning.

Standards

Any review of state and national standards for professional educators will include standards and goals that specifically address speaking. In Figure 1, the IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts that include speaking are listed.

Figure 1: IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts

4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

(www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Books/Sample/StandardsDoc.pdf, retrieved 6-29-10)

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s English Language Arts Standards are organized by either Expressive or Receptive skills for grades pre-kindergarten through 12; for example, the following is the first standard in this area.

**PK–12 Standard: EXPRESSIVE**

Students speak, write, and visually represent multiple types of texts using various evolving technologies and strategies. In these texts, students will engage in critical, creative, and reflective thinking to achieve diverse purposes within local, national, and world communities (http://dpi.wi.gov/standards/elaintro.html, retrieved 6-29-10).

Along with standards for states and professional literacy organizations, the National Middle School Association, too, has standards described in the form of essential attributes and characteristics of successful schools. Two such characteristics directly relate to the issue of fostering speaking in the classroom and are presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: National Middle School Association, excerpt from This We Believe: Essential Attributes and Characteristics of Successful Schools**

Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.

**Active Learning**

Instructional practices place students at the center of the learning process. As they develop the ability to hypothesize, to organize information into useful and meaningful constructs, and to grasp long-term cause and effect relationships, students are ready and able to play a major role in their own learning and education.

Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.

**(Challenging Curriculum)**

Curriculum embraces every planned aspect of a school’s educational program. An effective middle level curriculum is distinguished by learning activities that appeal to young adolescents, is exploratory and challenging, and incorporates student-generated questions and concerns.

(http://www.nmsa.org/AboutNMSA/ThisWeBelieve/The16Characteristics/tabid/1274/Default.aspx, retrieved 6-29-10)

The International Reading Association recently published their 2010 Standards for Reading Professionals. Briefly, the standards are broken down into six categories: foundational knowledge; curriculum and instruction; assessment and evaluation; diversity, literate environment; and professional learning and leadership (http://www.reading.org/General/CurrentResearch/Standards/ProfessionalStandards2010.aspx, retrieved 9-15-10). In a closer examination of the standard addressing the literate environment, two descriptors in particular caught my eye:

- “The goal of the literate environment is to create a flexible border between the world outside the classroom and school to the world within (i.e., making the curriculum permeable to the social context). Learning should extend beyond the walls of the educational context to explore the potential for acts of literacy that affect the world outside.

- Learners require a literate environment that affords them the opportunity to engage in meaningful ways by providing time, accessibility, tools, choice, and support” (http://www.reading.org/General/CurrentResearch/Standards/ProfessionalStandards2010.aspx, retrieved 9-15-10).

While neither of these descriptors specifically states that teachers should provide students with opportunities to talk about their learning, such terms as “world outside,” “social context,” and “engage,” naturally lead professional educators to such conclusions.

It is commonplace for professional organizations and educational institutions to address the connections
between speaking and learning in their standards. Figure 3 lists several such professional bodies with the URLs for their websites.

**Figure 3: Standards and Statements Addressing Fostering Speaking in the Classroom**

- **Common Core State Standards**
  [http://www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)
- **Illinois State Board of Education Learning Standards**
  [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ILS/](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ILS/)
- **International Reading Association/National Council for Teachers of English Standards for the English Language Arts**
- **National Middle School Association**
  [http://www.nmsa.org/AboutNMSA/ThisWeBelieve/The16Characteristics/tabid/1274/Default.aspx](http://www.nmsa.org/AboutNMSA/ThisWeBelieve/The16Characteristics/tabid/1274/Default.aspx)
- **Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction English Language Arts Standards**
  [http://dpi.wi.gov/standards/elaintro.html](http://dpi.wi.gov/standards/elaintro.html)

**Application**

The most effective means by which to empower critically-thinking, caring educators to implement new material into their teaching repertoires is simply to show them how. Like any other exemplary professionals, educators are short on time, high on motivation, and invested in making the most of their time, energy, and resources. Preservice educators benefit from explicit modeling and participation, while experienced educators appreciate not having to reinvent the wheel. Thus, this next section describes and provides examples of a number of research-based, best practice literacy instruction that incorporates speaking in the classroom.

**Discussion Web**

Discussion webs (Dolyniuk, 1995) are graphic organizers that encourage students to, as I explain it to my students, “think, pair, and square;” that is, first they think on their own, then they discuss with a partner, and finally they combine pairs into groups of four to complete a task. Discussion webs begin with a question that lends itself to yes and no answers with numerous reasons for either answer. Students are posed the question and then directed to think, pair, and square as they continually generate reasons why someone would answer yes and why someone would answer no to the question. The sample shown in the appendix is based upon *The Quiltmaker’s Gift* (Brumbeau, 2001).

**Intra-Act**

Like the discussion web, the purpose of Intra-Act (Hoffman, 1979) is to foster rich discussion of a controversial topic. The graphic organizer equated with Intra-Act poses a specific question and then introduces a grid with five columns. The first column has space for four statements related to the question, and then the subsequent four columns are to be filled with the names of the members of a discussion group. Each student in the discussion group lists the names of the other group members in the grid and then under each name predicts how each group member will respond to the statement.

**Save the Last Word**

In their down-to-earth and engaging professional text *Subjects Matter*, Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman (2004) describe a teaching strategy that encourages students to engage in rich discussion about carefully selected brief readings. Save the Last Word is a terrific tool to utilize with adolescents and adults, alike; in fact, it is one of my standard tools regardless of the course I am teaching. In Save the Last Word, students are instructed to first silently read the assigned selection and to make note of 3 or more facts or passages that catch their attention. Once all have completed the reading, students move into small groups, ideally no more than four, to discuss the reading. Each student should share one of the facts or passages that they found interesting, and then the rest of the group discussed that selection with the student. The teacher should inform the students that once all have shared in their small groups, they will be asked to report on one key idea they discussed. Teachers may wish to encourage groups to assign reporters and recorders, as well.
Grand Conversations

When it seems that students need more structure than simply having an opportunity to talk in small groups about what they have read, one effective teaching tool is a grand conversation (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Grand conversations are rules-based, sequentially organized discussions that encourage the vocal participation of all members of book clubs or other types of literary groups. The temptations to either monopolize the conversation or opt out of speaking at all are minimized because the rules explicitly state that everyone must share one idea and that no one may take a third turn until everyone in the group has shared at least once. Additional structure guides students in identifying the topics they wish to discuss.

Informal Debate

Finally, the last teaching strategy to present is one that incorporates argument, persuasion, respect for differing points of view, the opportunity to change one’s mind, and best of all (at least, it seems so to my desk-weary students), the prospect of actually being allowed to stand and move about the room. Informal debates (Rossman, 1982) are wonderful for both kinesthetic and linguistic learners, as well as for those who simply must get out of their desks soon or face the embarrassingly dire consequences of falling asleep in class. As with discussion webs and Intra-Act, informal debates require students to respond to thought-provoking questions. The difference, however is that students literally vote with their feet. Standing in a continuum across the room, students are instructed in my courses, “If you believe 100% yes is the answer to the question, stand on X side of the room. If you believe 100% no is the answer to the question, stand on Y side of the room. If you are not sure, stand in the center or somewhere around center but closer to the opinion of the side towards which you are leaning.” Students are then invited to take turns in all three sections to explain just why they are standing where they are. If a student’s explanation is compelling enough, it may prompt another student to move either completely to the other side or to the center. It is wise to impose a time limit for responses, as well as for the activity as a whole. I find it useful and somewhat cathartic to require students to complete three-minute essays before they leave for the day to reflect upon the activity and topic. Writing about their experience often tones down the antagonism and frustration that animated arguments can generate, and I benefit from discovering what students learned from the activity.

In Closing

Middle and high school educators are enduring pressures like never before to make every second of every period count. They must stay focused on standards and pending standardized assessments as they still endeavor to teach their content areas in engaging ways that motivate their students and convey their own passion for their subject areas. By providing students with a variety of structured opportunities to develop and voice their opinions, educators are simply enhancing the learning process with research-based best practice methodology. Rather than leaving any child behind, this is indeed the optimal path to bringing all learners forward in their growth as critical thinkers.

About the Author

Dr. Patricia L. Rieman has been an educator for well over half of her life. While completing her Ed.D at Northern Illinois University, she enjoyed over eight years as an adjunct instructor. Now beginning her third year as an assistant professor of education at Carthage College, Patricia still enjoys incorporating into her courses all of the methods described in this article. Patricia is married, has three cats, is owned by a dog, and lives in DeKalb, Illinois and Paddock Lake, Wisconsin. She can be reached via email at prieman@carthage.edu.
Appendix

DISCUSSION WEB

The Quiltmaker’s Gift
By Jeff Brumbeau

Should the quiltmaker have given the king so many more chances when he kept being so mean to her?

**NO**

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

**YES**

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

**CONCLUSION**

_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
**INTRA-ACT**

Topic: _____________________________________________________________

(Write group members' names in the top row of blanks.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENTS</th>
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**DIRECTIONS**

1. Think about the above statements and then under your name, write yes if you agree with the statement or no if you disagree with the statement.

2. Under your group mates' names, predict how they will respond to the statements by writing yes or no under their names by each statement.

3. When you meet back with your group, compare your predictions to how they really answered.

4. When the class meets to discuss the statements, use the information you found in your research to help you challenge, support, or question your own and other's opinions. Remember to listen well, support your responses with your research, and be respectful to others in your responses. (Based on Hoffman, 1979, but this is from the Johns Berglund text I helped with...)
Appendix (continued)

SAVE THE LAST WORD
• On your own, please silently read the excerpts on the next page.
• As you read, make special note of 3 or more facts or phrases that really catch your attention. Why are these so interesting? After 5 minutes, you will move into groups of 3.
• In your small groups, each of you will tell about one of the facts/phrases you read. You and your group members will have a moment to talk about each shared fact/phrase.
• In app. 3 more minutes, I will stop the conversations and ask each group to report on one key idea they discussed.
• Please make sure you have a recorder to keep track of key points, and a reporter to tell the rest of the group.

GRAND CONVERSATION
Rules of a grand conversation…
1. One person talks at a time;
2. Listen carefully;
3. Take turns;
4. Everyone shares at least one idea;
5. No one gets more than 2 turns until everyone has had a chance; and

Procedure:
1. Read a work of literature together with your students.
2. Remind students of rules/guidelines.
3. Identify some key questions to get the conversation going.
References


