

---

## Idea Exchange

---

This section represents a venue for sharing the work of our teaching peers. More to the point, what follows are suggestions for solving specific teaching problems. There is more than a small chance that some of these practical tips might be useful for those of us who teach. Should you wish more information on one or more of these tips, contact the author at the e-mail address attached to the tip.

---

\*\*\*

### Moving From the “Sage on the Stage” to the “Guide on the Side”: Discussion Strategies That Build Student Ownership

If you walked into my American Literature classroom on an average day, you would see my students sitting around a table, books open, notebooks open, pen in hand or nearby, and they would be talking to each other. It’s possible there would be a bowl in the center of the table filled with questions they’d written, or it’s possible that you’d see them tossing a tennis ball from speaker to speaker. What you probably wouldn’t see – or at least notice much if I am doing my job right – is me. I’m the one sitting quietly within or maybe even just outside the circle, jotting notes.

A common complaint from teachers is that conversation in

the classroom often bounces from student to teacher, to student to teacher, to student to teacher... and continues that way. It is essential for students to be engaged participants and not passive observers in their learning. If the teacher is talking 50% or more of the time, then what are the students doing? One way to get students more involved is by moving the teacher out of the center of conversation so students are talking more, thinking more, and listening to each other more.

Discussion is a skill and should be seen as essential to student preparedness for the world beyond secondary school. If we want engaged students in our classroom that are invested in text and share their ideas openly, it is our responsibility as educators to teach them these skills. Below are several steps we use in my classroom to practice and master academic discussion.

**Step One: Preparedness.** Students can’t have a meaningful discussion unless they have first read material deeply or researched a topic thoroughly. In my classroom it is common to see additional texts or printouts that students have brought with them, post-its tacked under author and character names, and journals hastily re-stacked on the shelf because they are used often at the opening or close of class.

When creating class work that will stimulate discussion, it is good to have a concrete assignment with an abstract product. Some examples from American Literature:

- write three discussion questions connected to your reading. These should be written or typed on a separate sheet of paper that will be checked at the beginning of class and handed in at the end with your notes from the discussion.
- Bring in two “nuggets” of research about the author of our text. Go for original; don’t tell me where he/she was born, or that they wrote this book. Try to find information that no one else will find! Bring printouts from websites or pages copied from books to verify your source (This may be a great way for students to practice MLA citation, if that is a skill you are also teaching).

Neither of the assignments above can be completed unless the student does his or her reading and research. Also, because there is a product that must come to class with them, it is easy to quickly assess at the beginning of the hour which students are ready for class.

**Step Two: Questions.** The assignment “write three questions” will not produce great conversation unless students know how to write good questions that will get their peers talking. Before assigning question-writing, it is a good idea to ask students: “What makes a good discussion question?” A sampling of my students’ responses include:

- it is a high interest topic
- it has more than one answer
- it is linked to the text or theme.

This is also a good time to introduce or review question stems (i.e. “who, what, when, where, why, and how?”) and have students practice writing questions that meet their standard for a good question. They should find that “How” and “What” questions will provide deeper understanding than “Who, When, Where” questions. The questions below have one answer and can be answered quickly without much speculation or analysis:

- Who is the main character of this novel?
- When does the turning point happen in this short story?
- Where is the setting of the scene?

These questions from the American Literature students’ study of *The Things They Carried* illustrate how quality questions can set up an engaging discussion:

- How is “truth” explored in O’Brien’s fictional account of his Vietnam experience?
- What mood is created by O’Brien’s use of the lists of items the soldiers carry?

Questions have a tendency to get stronger peer responses if they are linked to passages in the text, because then students must dig into the book and reread to develop their understand-

ing. For example:

- Why does Rat Kiley shoot the baby water buffalo on page 78? How does it relate to Curt Lemon’s death?

Also, make sure to caution students about unanswerable questions. Students and teachers cannot answer questions like, “How does O’Brien feel about the Iraq War?” Only an author can answer that; even research is speculative.

**Step Three: Behavior.** Students must know what a teacher is looking for when watching them discuss. There are several roles that students can play in discussion.

- Leader – students who are leaders often start things off with supplemental material or a strong opening question and will change topic when there is a lull in conversation. They do not watch the teacher for cues; instead, they watch their classmates to see when it may be time to move to another topic or question. This may be an assigned role and it may rest on one person or a small group.
- Contributor – students who contribute come to class with materials, share questions and comments that build off of what has previously been said, and take an active role in sharing ideas. All students should be contributors. Some specialized ways to contribute include:
  - o Supporter – students who support in discussion are good at using the names of their classmates when referring to their ideas and may ask someone a direct question to invite their participation.
  - o Challenger – students who challenge bring up opposing viewpoints to the popular opinion in conversation in a respectful way, often by asking follow-up questions that push the class to explore various facets of a question.
- Listener/Observer – it is a misconception to think that only students who talk are communicating. When students are not talking, it is still important to show inter-

est and engagement in what is said. A listener uses eye contact and focuses on the person speaking. They may show engagement by turning to a page in the text mentioned by the speaker, jotting notes, or through nonverbal signals (like nodding).

Often people believe that discussion skills are subjective, but many of the behaviors are observable and can be measured. Another thing you would see, if you were in my classroom, are clipboards hanging on one wall with charts. If you look closely, you'll see each student's name in a row with hash marks and notes in columns with labels like "question," "text reference," "interruption," and "name use." These provide immediate feedback to students about their discussion behavior.

**Step Four: Reflection.** Students need to know what their strengths and weaknesses are in a discussion in order to improve. Feedback on discussion should be frequent and concrete. Some ways to provide feedback include:

- Teacher observation and conference – watch students during discussions and take notes on their contributions. Informally or formally report the results of what you see to them.
- Peer observation and reporting –on assigned days, articulate discussion leaders and observers, or use a model where some students are responsible for watching and charting what they see in discussion. At the end of the hour, reserve the last 5-10 minutes for the observer to talk to the group about what they saw.
- Self-assessment—at scheduled times (quarter or semester) have students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in discussion and set personal goals for improvement.

I find that most students want confirmation from me about behaviors they know they exhibit in discussion, so my feedback pairs nicely with their reflections. The feedback they give each other is often more direct and their responses to each other are

often punctuated with laughter and nods.

I always know that my students have successfully learned what I want them to know on the days there is a substitute teacher. If the notes tell me which pages the students explored, the themes they discussed, and that all students showed some observable behavior, it was a good discussion.

If students feel accountability for their preparation, write compelling questions, are aware of their behavior, and observe and reflect on their own and others' discussion, they will develop a sense of ownership for their learning and sharing that moves conversation away from teacher leadership and toward student leadership. Teacher knowledge becomes the guide, as it is still the teacher's responsibility to set a context or tone, to provide quality primary and supplementary materials and to step in when students need additional guidance and support. However, students become the center of conversation and take on the active roles in discussion.

### What makes a good discussion?

#### BEFORE

- Be prepared – read your text; come with assignments done
- Questions should be complex with the ability to share multiple views

#### DURING

- Everyone is involved and focused and invested
- Relevant issues are talked about – related to the text
- Eye contact is important so that the speaker knows you are listening
- There is more going on inside your head than coming out of your mouth
- Ask a question, knowing what your "talking points" are so you can clarify or follow up
- Support your opinions with evidence
- Use text references, chapter names so everyone can find

- your source
- Don't repeat or restate; it shuts down conversation
  - One person should not dominate; equal contributions
  - Respect when others are talking. Don't talk over or interrupt
  - Don't have side conversations
  - Pacing – pauses can be good for thought
  - Respect other people's ideas, even if you don't agree
  - It's good to have differing opinion; conflict is important
  - Arguments are not productive – it closes out everyone except the people arguing
  - The best way to challenge is with a question
  - Quality, not just quantity

#### AFTER

- You still want to talk to someone as you are walking out the door
- You have reached a deeper understanding about the topic than you had when we started
- You have more questions when you leave than when you entered
- You have an emotional reaction to the content or group

Note: the American Literature students generated this list during the first week of class. It was brainstormed from the prompt, organized and printed on a laminated bookmark that each student carries in whatever text we are reading throughout the year.

*Kathryn Campbell teaches at St. Paul Academy and Summit School in St. Paul, Minnesota, and has been trained in discussion techniques at the Exeter Humanities Institute and through professional development. Discussion is a graded component in her courses and, on the best days in class, she doesn't talk much.*

*lit.soup@gmail.com*

\*\*\*

#### Listening CHEC Strategy: Ask, Don't Tell

Talking about listening is a good thing unless that's all we do. We also need to take the time to model listening and to give students opportunities to practice listening. This creates a new classroom environment, one rich with opportunities for response and thus greater student engagement.

Good listening is an essential part of good communication, which means that good communication cannot occur without good listening. Therefore, if teachers infuse their classrooms with a culture of active, dynamic communication—the give and take that creates shared meaning—teachers will know that listening is taking place. Teachers should catch students listening, point it out, and celebrate it.

“CHEC” \* breaks this process into three steps: check, engage, and celebrate. Accomplish the first step with yes-or-no questions directed at the group. Read faces or postures for clues as to whom you need to try to engage, which is the next step.

Engagement occurs through mini-conversation, one student at a time.

“Before you start working on your poems today, I want to review the concept of ‘metaphor.’”

Most students lean forward and nod their heads, but one fellow in the back tosses his pen down on his notebook, folds his arms across his chest, kicks his legs out, and leans back in his chair. Because the body language suggests that the student still needs to be engaged, the teacher focuses on this student.

“Hey, John,” says the teacher to the student, “What if we played basketball against each other? What would happen?”

John unfolds his arms. “Man, I would dunk on you.”

“Slam dunk?”

“You know it.” The other kids laugh.

“Suppose I were to give you a quiz and I called it a ‘slam dunk.’ Tell me how hard you think the quiz would

be.”

“It’s a sure thing, like how sure it would be that I would dunk on you.”

“OK. That’s all a metaphor is, John. You say a quiz is a slam-dunk. It isn’t really a slam dunk, of course, but you know the quiz is automatic, a sure thing, like a slam dunk. Who remembers what we said about metaphors yesterday?”

Shanika raises her hand. “It’s like you call something something it isn’t in order to make a point about the thing you’re trying to talk about.”

John laughs.

“You got it, Shanika. I can always count on you. Thanks for the help. John, thanks for letting me pick on you a little bit. OK, now you all have it down, so show me what you can do.”

You can engage a successful student to show the others what success looks like and what rewards success offers. You can engage struggling students to see what they know and assess what their next step ought to be. You can engage all students to let them experience success and to acknowledge and praise them for what they *have* learned.

Engagement is a dimension of higher-order thinking. Teachers achieve it through open-ended questioning. They ask questions that require active thought and specific examples from textual, visual, or oral presentation. In the case just discussed, the open-ended questions were: (in other words):

“Define ‘metaphor’.”

“Discuss the mechanics of a particular metaphor.”

“Explain how you can use prior knowledge to decode a metaphor.”

“Given your understanding of the term ‘slam dunk,’ evaluate the difficulty of a quiz that the teacher calls a “slam-dunk.”

“Given your understanding of the term ‘slam dunk,’ infer a teacher’s meaning when she calls a quiz a “slam dunk.”

Open-ended questioning forces thought. If a student is not sure what “discuss” means, the teacher should ask another student to explain the word, then go back to the first student. “Discuss” means ‘tell about.’ Explain means ‘show how.’” Use power words when you question students. Ask them to identify, explain, compare, contrast, summarize, apply, infer, analyze, evaluate. Have posters with these words and their definitions on the wall so that students can look up what is needed for each operation. Teach the power words explicitly and give students multiple opportunities to use them during class discussions.

This kind of thought is operational, similar to figuring out the right way to solve a math problem. The state standards refer to this kind of thinking as “constructed response.” When the student performs one of these operations, it is time to celebrate.

Celebration is a dimension of specific, authentic praise: “Thanks for letting me pick on you a little bit, John. It helps everyone to review things we’ve talked about in class. Shanika, your answer reminds me that I can always count on you.”

Always praise a student when she shows that she can do one of these operations. This celebration takes about a minute. Teachers don’t need to dance around, hand out candy, or break into song. Simple, authentic praise seals the engagement, plugs into the student’s drive for success, and moves the class through a moment of shared meaning. When teachers praise students authentically, they model the process and rewards of listening.

Checking, engaging, celebrating will help you create a culture of shared meaning. This culture will engage, support and nurture learners at all levels, from all backgrounds. As the culture of communication grows, you will know one thing for certain: the students are listening. They are listening not because you told them but because you asked them.

\*Steve Slavik, now the curriculum and instruction leader for Integrated Language Arts in the Anoka-Hennepin ISD #11, once told me that a good response follows the format TEC: thesis, evaluation, and conclusion. I have twisted this a bit to come up with CHEC: check for understanding, engage, and celebrate. These three actions are similar in purpose and effect to those of TEC.

*Peder Engebretson teaches English grades 6-9 at Anoka-Hennepin's Compass Program. He is the chair of MCTE's middle school committee.*

*pedermikk@visi.com*

\*\*\*

### **Oops, Oh! Huh?: Categorizing Students' Reactions to Errors in Their Writing**

Much has been written about meta-cognition and reflection in the writing process. Work by Chris Anson, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Donald Schon, Terry Underwood and others has cut a wide investigative swath into the processes and benefits of guided reflection before, during, and after a student has "completed" a piece of writing. In her book, *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry*, Donna Qualley connects reflection with discovery. Qualley suggests that students experience a series of discoveries as they navigate through the sometimes smooth but often choppy waters of the writing process. Students, according to Qualley, arrive at "a kind of understanding whose essential truth is only realized or more fully grasped as it is made manifest through the individual's experience and contemplation of that experience" (35). It is this notion of discovery and contemplation that has prompted me to devise a system whereby students might categorize their reactions to the errors in their writing.

To a limited extent, Richard Haswell has examined students' various perceptions of their errors. Haswell points out the distinction between "those errors that stand on the edge of

competence in an unstable posture of disjunction ('I know it is either conceive or concieve.') or half-discarded fossilization ('I don't know why I capitalized Fraternities. I know that's wrong')" (Haswell 168). Haswell's work on students' reactions to and use of teacher feedback reminds us that developing writers are just that - developing writers whose skills may ebb and flow between carelessness and mastery during any given writing occasion. Drawing parallel though distinct conclusions to Haswell's work, Suzanne Kaback has explored students' use or neglect of teacher feedback on their writing. Her "revision think sheet" systematically prompts students to analyze teacher feedback on their drafts and to plan and demonstrate intentional changes on revisions based on the feedback (Kaback 134).

We know that students who possess varying levels of writing skill can and do produce essays of similar quality. Because of blind spots, lack of motivation, carelessness, or interference by life circumstances, the highly skilled writer is as apt to produce marginal work as the proficient writer. Mystified by these discrepancies between ability and performance, I have become increasingly curious about students' ways of perceiving errors in their writing.

In order to examine the clear or foggy lenses through which students view their writing, I have devised an "error reaction" schematic that categorizes students' reactions to their errors. By using this chart to categorize their errors, students discover the extent to which their errors are evidence of carelessness, forgetfulness, or ignorance. I maintain that all errors fall into one of three categories: the "Oops" error, commonly referred to as the "dumb mistake; the "Oh!" error, reflected by the statement "I know how to fix that!"; or the "Huh?" error, typified by the frustrated utterance, "What's wrong with that?" Gathering this information on error reactions proves valuable to both me and my students, for it signifies either a false alarm ("Oops") or a high alert ("Huh?") that determines whether a student needs an occasional reminder or intense remediation.

One or all of these three expressions likely represent students' reactions to the errors in their writing. Realizing their

error reactions is important because each error reaction category signifies where their writing challenges fall on the continuum between carelessness and mastery. These categories also provide a meter by which students can gauge the time, attention, and deliberation they must devote to resolving the errors specific to their writing.

After I return a graded essay to my students, I ask them to identify their errors and categorize their reaction to each error according to the “Oops. Oh, Huh?” schematic (see Appendix A). This exercise prompts students to “own” their responsibility (or irresponsibility) in the commission of their errors. If, for instance, a highly skilled writer discovers that most of his or her errors fall into the “Oops” category, then he or she needs to be more attentive when proofreading and editing. If a student’s reactions largely fall into the “Oh” category, then he or she apparently realizes the nature of the violations and must be more vigilant when encountering challenging but familiar writing terrain. If, however, the majority of a student’s reactions match the “Huh?” category, then he or she should seek clarification, and the instructor, by benefit and direction of the schematic, should provide appropriate and targeted instruction to address the “Huh?” challenges in the student’s writing.

Error reaction is but one component of a more comprehensive and fruitful reflection process. Kathleen Blake Yancey beckons us to engage students in sustained, recursive reflection, suggesting that, “When we reflect, we call upon the cognitive, the affective, the intuitive, putting these into play with each other to help us understand how something completed looks later....” (6). Though certainly limited in its meta-cognitive depth and breadth, categorizing error reactions can illuminate students’ awareness and ownership of their errors while informing teachers of what students know about their writing, what they know but sometimes forget about their writing, what they do not know about their writing, and, most importantly, what they need to know about their writing.

*Paul Carney teaches at Minnesota State Community and Technical College, Fergus Falls. He is also the developer and coordinator of “Ready or Not Writing”, an online drop box to which high school students submit their writing to college English instructors for diagnostic college-readiness ratings and feedback.*

*readyornotwriting.org*

### Works Cited

- Haswell, Richard. “Minimal Marking.” *College English* 45.6 (1983): 166-170.
- Kaback, Suzanne. “Rethinking Think Sheets: Supporting Writers from Draft to Final Copy.” Fall 2007. *Minnesota English Journal*: 133- 139.
- Qualley, Donna. *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1997.
- Yancey, Kathleen Blake. *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Logan: Utah State UP, 1998.

### Appendix A Error Reaction Schematic

Error Reaction Category	Typical Reaction Statements	Error, Location, and Frequency
“Oops”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Oops!”</li> <li>- “I can’t believe I did that!”</li> <li>- “What a stupid mistake.”</li> <li>- “Duh! I knew that!”</li> <li>- “How could I have missed that?”</li> </ul>	
“Oh!”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Oh! I see the problem now.”</li> <li>- “I understand the problem, and I know how to fix it.”</li> <li>- “Okay, I see. This is something I need to work on, and I’m aware of the strategies for fixing or improving it.”</li> </ul>	
“Huh?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Huh? What’s wrong with that?”</li> <li>- “What the #@&amp;*?”</li> <li>- “I don’t see the problem. It looks fine to me.”</li> <li>- “I have no clue about what’s wrong here.”</li> <li>- “Okay, I see there’s a problem, but I don’t know how to fix it.”</li> </ul>	

\*\*\*

“Word”) to the *MEJ* editor a teaching tip, an idea about teaching a piece of literature that has worked for you with a particular audience, a writing prompt you’ve used to generate discussion, a strategy for developing discussion on a piece of literature, a writing assignment (along with the context you’ve created for it), a research exercise, or an effective way of dealing with the writing process or revision or mechanics. Label your e-mail “The Idea Exchange” and address it to [straits@mnsu.edu](mailto:straits@mnsu.edu).

Thanks in advance for contributing your ideas to this enterprise.

Bill Dyer

Co-Editor, *The Minnesota English Journal*

Note: The Idea Exchange is now a regular feature of *The Minnesota English Journal*. Most teachers are astonishingly busy. Sitting down to write a long paper is out of the question for people with five or more preps per day. Thus, we want our readers to “think small” for a few minutes. Jot down on an e-mail message (or an enclosure in an e-mail message in