



Valuing what students bring to the table

At this time of the year, when the formal assessment process is finished and the summer holidays are hovering tantalizingly on the horizon, it is the perfect time to take a bit of a risk and try something you may not have done before. You know your students well, and they you, so the classroom rapport and trust is firm – firm enough to do things differently. This is the perfect time to examine your talking and listening interactions in the classroom, and see if you can minimise the IRE (Initiate – Respond – Evaluate) questions in your writing sessions.

One strategy for encouraging talk in learning is the ‘cloze’ procedure, first developed in 1953.

The connection between language and thought, the power of spoken language to build students’ cognitive development is a necessary component of preparing students for writing.

We can become better skilled at using talk to build field knowledge and to assist students to make connections between stimulus material - a text, an activity, an image - and their own experiences and knowledge.



No child comes to the classroom, or the writing table, a blank slate. They have had many experiences, both rich and the everyday, that make them who they are. If we are foolish enough to ignore this wealth of knowledge, and not draw on who each student is, we deny them the recognition of that experience, and the acknowledgement that their knowledge is important. The classroom turns back into the place where other stuff happens, unrelated to the real world. Writing to build on our knowledge is an exciting challenge to be learned about if we set our students up for success.

Introduce any new ideas and practices to your students as ‘research’. Explain that you are trying to alter the questioning that happens in the classroom so that everyone can put their ideas forward. Get the students to help you record the results by counting the number of IRE interactions that have only 3 ‘turns’ (you’ll need to explain this), timing the extended interactions, providing feedback to the class about the difference this made. Record all comments. It **is** research.

This can be the ‘trial run’ to set you up for the new year and the new class. If things don’t go so well, then you are in the perfect position to be able to find out why not. The kids will be able to tell you, and to help work on making it more effective.

We don’t necessarily know a lot about our students’ previous experiences with our new topic. We can set up the classroom and undertake stimulus and field-building, but each child brings their own voice.

What we need to do:

- establish an environment and climate that encourages – and insists upon – opportunities for extended talk. Our students need to know they can talk about their thinking, try out ideas, follow through, and build on the ideas, thoughts and conversations of others. We must make talk ‘collective, reciprocal and supportive’ (Alexander, 2006 p.51) It is here that the real learning begins.

For students to be able to write effectively, they need to know what they are writing about. We help support learning and prompting connections by building the field. It is in this process that



students become acquainted with the subject matter, the appropriate language, and the vocabulary. Students will make connections with what they already know.

- build the field - students in pairs or groups,
 - making observations,
 - making links with known information,
 - asking questions,
 - suggesting vocabulary and concepts,
 - deconstructing a model text or stimulus,
 - paraphrasing and summarising.
- keep building the field. These types of activities can occur at any time throughout the writing process, whenever students need to tap into and build on what is known and what has been learned. Watch and be ready for the signals that show they are ready to talk.

Some strategies:

- ‘floorstorming’ (see [Writing to learn activities](#), and Katherin Cartwright’s [Floorstorming in mathematics](#) in *Primary Learning - Resources*) using images, text, puzzles, illustrations, video, whatever resource is useful. Students are required to bring their knowledge and observations to the fore, and to use them. *Floorstorming in mathematics* has detailed information and ideas as part of the ‘frontloading’ in maths, and the structures are applicable to other subjects.
- graphic organisers such as [Venn diagrams](#) – use for comparing and contrasting - and flow charts. These help students identify and organise their knowledge
- open questions which demand clarification of relationships between text characters; these can assist with understanding how relationships shift over the time of a narrative.

Questions such as:

- *How do you think Rosie would feel if she knew the fox had been hurt? What makes you think that? Can you explain that further?* (‘Rosie’s Walk’, by Pat Hutchins 2009, Penguin);
- *What do the images on the first page remind you of? Who do you think these people are? Can you tell us some more? Can anyone else tell us what they recognise?* (‘The Arrival, by Shaun Tan 2006, Scholastic)



- mind maps - used to represent words and ideas linked to a central idea; helpful when generating the vocabulary for a topic. Write the words on sticky notes and add them to the 'map'. You and the students can then arrange or categorise them in useful ways, and draw on the vocabulary when speaking and writing.

Literacy Links

'... in contemporary curriculum, developing interaction skills is firmly on the agenda for the teaching and learning of English across Australia'

Christine Edwards-Groves highlights in PETAA Paper 195 (p.3).

Being able to talk about ideas begins to be identified in Aspects of Speaking, Cluster 3 of the NSW Literacy continuum (2012), ideally at around the middle of Kindergarten:

- ▶ *Contributes ideas in small group and whole class discussions.*

In the ACARA Literacy Progression (2017), the sub-element Interacting InT3:

- ▶ *Asks relevant questions for clarification or to find out others' ideas (What do you think about that?)*
- ▶ *Interacts using appropriate language in pairs or a small group to complete tasks*

In terms of bringing their own experiences to their writing, this is described in the NSW Literacy continuum (2012) in Cluster 5, at around the beginning of Year 1:

- ▶ *Draws on personal experience and topic knowledge to create texts of about 4-5 sentences for a range of purposes.*

And in the ACARA Literacy Progression, the sub-element Creating texts, CrT5:

- ▶ *writes text for a familiar purpose (to recount a personal experience, to tell a story, to express thoughts and feelings, to give an opinion)*
- ▶ *uses ideas from informative and imaginative texts read or viewed for own writing*



Writing

In response to 'Rosie's Walk', younger students could be asked to write the story of the walk, and of the fox's attempts to get close. Students could work in pairs, each taking the part of one of the characters. Features students could use include:

- writing in the first person (*I saw Rosie set off on her walk. Yum, I thought ...*)
- time connectives (*then, after that, while I was walking past the pond ...*)
- action verbs (*walked, stepped, fell, bumped etc*)

Students could develop a text innovated on this one, using the playground and a teacher and student (!) or their own neighbourhood and its characteristics.

In response to the opening page in 'The Arrival', older students could develop a poetic piece, built around the items depicted on the page. Try American poet Ted Kooser's poem, '[Abandoned Farmhouse](#)' as a prompt. The poem will take several readings.

Teacher and student research - talking, building ideas, building language, thought and cognitive capacity, and writing.



References

ACARA (2017) National Literacy and Learning Progressions

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/national-literacy-and-numeracy-learning-progressions/> accessed 19/11/2018

Alexander, R. (2006) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking classroom talk* 3rd Ed. Dialogos: UK

Edwards-Groves, C. (2014) *Talk moves: A repertoire of practices for productive classroom dialogue* PETAA Paper 195.

Kooser, T. (1980) *Abandoned Farmhouse* at

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52935/abandoned-farmhouse> accessed 27/11/2018

NSW DEC (2012) *Literacy continuum K-6*

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/literacy-and-numeracy/literacy/literacy-continuum> (available to NSW DoE staff only)