

The Main Idea's PD Suggestions for *Academic Conversations*

I. The Benefits & Challenges of Implementing Academic Conversations

A. Provide teachers with a basic definition of academic conversations and the excerpt of a conversation between two students below.

What are academic conversations? -- Academic conversations are *purposeful* and *sustained* conversations about school topics that help students learn from one another and build meanings they didn't have before.

What do they look like? – Take a look at the excerpt of the sample discussion between two students below:

<p><i>Elisa:</i> Why did the author write this? <i>Brian:</i> To tell us about the Boston Massacre. But what I don't get was why it was called a massacre if only seven people were killed. <i>Elisa:</i> What do you mean? <i>Brian:</i> Well, the people weren't so famous, and a massacre usually means lots of people die. <i>Elisa:</i> Maybe the people reporting it wanted to make it sound really bad.</p>	<p><i>Brian:</i> Maybe they wanted to get people all mad in order to rebel, like, to start the Revolution. At that time, not everyone wanted to rebel. <i>Elisa:</i> Oh, like the teacher said, a lot of times the newspapers would make up stuff... <i>Brian:</i> You mean <i>exaggerate</i>? <i>Elisa:</i> Yeah, they would exaggerate things or focus on things or not print things to influence people. <i>Brian:</i> So calling it a massacre made the English look really evil?</p>
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B. After reading this brief overview above, ask teachers to think about and write down what they imagine might be a few benefits of integrating more academic conversations into their classes and what might be some of the challenges. Then have them discuss what they wrote in pairs. You may want to come together and discuss some of the challenges or concerns as a group and then brainstorm solutions. If staff is overly concerned that they lack the skills to implement academic conversations, consider purchasing the book for them. If staff is considered about discipline, classroom management, or culture, consider having them consult other resources such as *The First Days of School*, *Tools for Teaching*, *Teach Like a Champion*, or *Shaping School Culture* – see The Main Idea's website.

II. Implementing the 5 Core Academic Conversation Skills Across the School

If all teachers, across all grades and all subjects, reinforce the same 5 core academic conversation skills, the students at your school will develop a strong foundation of academic speaking skills. Below is a chart of the five core skills the authors have identified that make conversations *more academic*.

<p>Skill 1: Elaborate and Clarify – When a speaker introduces a muddy or general topic like, “She was a very important person in that time period,” we need to teach students to elaborate and clarify. We can teach simple elaboration skills. One is to elaborate with analogies, “It’s like when...” Another is to elaborate with examples, a natural way to explain or clarify. Teachers must also teach <i>questioning</i> as an essential part of skill 1. “Can you elaborate on...?” Asking the right question at the right time keeps the conversation going and gets the speaker to elaborate. This is one of the <i>most important</i> skills in academic conversations.</p>
<p>Skill 2: Support Ideas with Examples – In an academic conversation, students will need to provide examples as evidence. These examples can come from a wide range of sources such as the text being discussed, other texts, other media, the Web, the outside world, etc. Students will also need to be able to determine which examples are stronger than others in a conversation.</p>
<p>Skill 3: Build On and/or Challenge a Partner’s Idea – Currently, many students just “popcorn” out comments in classroom discussions without connecting their ideas to those of their peers. This is because they have not yet learned how to build on the ideas of their peers or appropriately challenge those ideas. Many good ideas in life come from other people and students need to learn how to zoom in on one of those ideas, link to one of those ideas, or find a way to tactfully challenge a peer’s ideas.</p>
<p>Skill 4: Paraphrase – Paraphrasing involves several skills – keeping track of ideas we are hearing, organizing them, understanding them, making inferences, and synthesizing important points. It is a useful skill in that it helps the speaker and listener negotiate meaning. The listener paraphrases important points back to the speaker who can then clarify if that was the intended message. It is great practice in listening and understanding. Anyone can nod, but paraphrasing shows true listening and comprehension.</p>
<p>Skill 5: Synthesize Conversation Points – This is a high-level skill. It takes practice to bring together the skills of remembering and keeping track of important ideas while putting useful pieces of the conversation together in a coherent statement. Teachers can leave time at the end for students to summarize the most important points on paper individually and then write a joint synthesis as a record of the conversation.</p>

A. Distribute this chart. Have teachers read through it and look for the 5 core skills in the conversation below between two fifth graders about a book about Ruby Bridges, one of the first African-American girls to attend an all-white school in 1960.

<p><i>Monica:</i> What do you think the story means? <i>Luis:</i> Ruby was brave. <i>Monica:</i> Can you elaborate on that? <i>Luis:</i> She was scared, but kept walking past those angry people. Then she was alone with the teacher. That’s scary, too. <i>Monica:</i> Yeah, I don’t think I would’ve kept going. I once had some old man scream at me and I stayed away from that store for weeks. But then it was crazy; Ruby prayed for those people who hated her! <i>Luis:</i> Why’d she do that?</p>	<p><i>Monica:</i> I don’t think screaming back at them would’ve helped. Maybe they wanted her to yell at them so they could have reasons to not like her. <i>Luis:</i> so you’re saying, she would’ve become like them. <i>Monica:</i> Yeah, I guess. So, how do we sum this up? <i>Luis:</i> Ruby was brave by walking past yelling people. She forgave them to not be like them. We should forgive people like that, like that old man that yelled at you. <i>Monica:</i> And not give in. She could’ve stopped going to school and forgiven them, but she didn’t.</p>
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B. As a school, discuss some ways your teachers can commit to implementing these skills *across the school*. Brainstorm a list and then put teachers into work groups to get working now! Below are two suggestions to get started:

1. **Create a poster** of the 5 Core Academic Conversation Skills along with conversation prompts based on the one on pp.32-33 and the appendix in the book and excerpted below from p. 2 of the summary. Post this in *every* classroom of the school:

Conversation Skills	Frames for Prompting the Skill	Frames for Responding
Elaborate and Clarify	Can you elaborate on...? What do you mean by...? Can you be more specific? Can you tell more about...?	I think it means that... In other words... An analogy might be... It's similar to when...
Support Ideas with Examples	Can you give me an example from the text? What is the evidence for that? Why do you say that?	For example... An illustration of this could be... In this situation...
Build On and/or Challenge a Partner's Idea	Can you add to this idea? Do you agree? What might be other points of view?	I would add that... I want to expand on your point... Then again, I think that... Yet I wonder also if...
Paraphrase	I'm not sure that was clear...	So, you are saying that...
Synthesize Conversation Points	What have we discussed so far? Can we synthesize?	We can say that... The main theme seems to be...

2. **Create a school-wide rubric** to assess the 5 Core Academic Conversation Skills that *everyone* will use to assess academic conversations throughout the school. There is no specific rubric for the 5 Core Skills, but a teacher work group can adapt this:

	At or Above (3)	Approaching (2)	Below (1)
(F) Stay focused.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build on comments. Connect ideas to topic well. Negotiate conflicting ideas and word meanings. Offer few, if any, tangential thoughts. 	Stay mostly on topic; show some idea building and negotiation; go on some tangents; show some confusion.	Rarely connect or build on ideas; go on many tangents and give unrelated information; demonstrate no negotiation of differing ideas.
(S) Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support ideas and opinions with examples from the text, life, and previous lessons; clearly explain and elaborate on ideas. 	Offer some prompting for and support of ideas with examples and clarifications.	Offer little or no support of ideas and reasons; show lack of appropriate prompting.
(P) Paraphrase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paraphrase partner's ideas to clarify, deepen, and stay focused; synthesize key points or steps. 	Offer some paraphrasing and synthesizing of key points.	Offer little or no paraphrasing and synthesizing.
(C) Communicate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use communication behaviors; actively listen (eyes and body); take turns; value partner comments; be respectful. 	Show some appropriate listening and turn-taking behaviors.	Show little eye contact or listening; interrupt; dominate talk or do not contribute at all.

III. Weaving Academic Conversations into Lesson Plans

In order to have high-level discussions, as required by the Common Core State Standards, teachers need to be *purposeful* about planning. However, they do *not* need to start from scratch in order to incorporate academic conversations into their lesson plans. Furthermore, academic conversations will help students improve their understanding of lesson objectives *already in place*.

A. Have teachers take a look at this sample language arts lesson plan excerpt that has academic conversations woven in.

Weave Academic Conversations into Lessons – A Sample ELA Lesson Plan Excerpt
<p>Furthermore, conversations can and should be woven throughout the lesson as a tool to deepen learning. Here is an example in ELA:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Students circulate and <i>discuss</i> several quotations and words from the text as well as the title to predict possible meanings. The teacher reads the text aloud to think aloud and <i>discuss</i> the purpose of the text, predictions, connections, and ask questions. Student pairs silently read the rest of the text, stopping at agreed points to write down conversation ideas. They stop twice to <i>converse</i> about the text. The whole group holds a <i>discussion</i> to generate possible topics for extended academic conversations. The teacher and a student model one of the five <i>conversation</i> skills. In pairs, students hold academic <i>conversations</i> emphasizing one of the five conversation skills on one of the generated topics.

B. Have teachers bring in a lesson plan they plan to teach and rewrite it with academic conversations woven in. Note that there are three sample lesson plans with academic conversations woven in that you may want to copy from the book and distribute:

- Language Arts Lesson Plan with Academic Conversations (pp. 138-139)
- Sample History Lesson Plan with Academic Conversations (pp. 162-163)
- Sample Science Lesson Plan with Academic Conversations (pp. 179-181)

Once teachers have rewritten their lesson plans, they can trade lesson plans with another teacher from to get feedback.