



## Preparing students for exploratory talk

The **'Preparing students for exploratory talk'** reading outlines the importance of preparing students for discussion activities, and details strategies for doing so.

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It's essential to prepare students for discussion activities, by making explicit the format for 'a good discussion'. Students should be aware that when asked to discuss Talking Points, their task is to engage one another in talk, with the purpose of negotiating to establish a joint opinion or response to share with the class. To do so, they will need to be aware of the importance of 'exploratory talk'.

Exploratory talk is educationally effective talk to which everyone contributes. In exploratory talk, each person is asked directly for their ideas. There is respect for what is said; reasons are offered and asked for, and a degree of challenge is expected and valued. Open-mindedness is important, as is sharing of all relevant information. The group knows how to listen attentively to elaboration and explanation, and every group member is expected to be able to summarise and communicate the gist of the group's discussion. (Mercer and Littleton, 2007:71).

During or after exploratory talk, groups may find that it is not always possible to come to a mutually agreed response. Discussion can then be opened to the whole class, with the group first explaining their reasons for being unable to agree. Groups should be aware that hesitancy, uncertainty and tentativeness are all of value, because they indicate the chance to learn. Individuals, or groups, can helpfully express lack of knowledge or understanding in factual information, ideas and opinions.

Listening and turn taking are key skills, along with the ability to chain ideas together and to summarise points that others have made. In a talk group setting, every student should know that they are responsible for their own learning and that of others. Talk is the medium through which learning happens in discussion, so the talk must be focused on the task in hand.

Exploratory talk can help students to think and develop new ideas by taking other points of view into account. In summary it has these features:

- each group member understands the importance of discussion
- everyone contributes
- contributions are invited, and carefully attended to
- all shared ideas are respected
- reasons are offered for opinions
- challenges are valued as a way of stimulating thinking
- disagreement is worded to enable further discussion
- ideas are linked through talk
- contributors have time to develop their ideas and elaborate on what they say
- the group works together to negotiate a shared outcome

Discussion based on exploratory talk enables interthinking – that is, shared thinking aloud. Interthinking provides individuals with opportunities to (Mercer and Littleton, 2007):

- articulate own ideas, comparing them with others;
- analyse and evaluate a wider range of points of view;
- elaborate and explain in ways that establish cogent arguments;
- better understand the thinking of others;
- see ways to create a new, shared response by chaining or intertwining group ideas.

When working with talk tasks such as Talking Points, students use both their curriculum and informal knowledge. Students should be aware that the learning aims of their group work are:

- to engage wholeheartedly with the ideas put forward;
- to prepare to share ideas in a whole-class discussion or forum;
- to establish a depth of understanding about the ideas under examination.

### **About Talking Points**

Talking Points are thought-provoking statements, which can support discussion if presented to well-prepared students. Initially students may need to be offered key phrases which will help them to generate exploratory talk. Learning how to use such phrases – or ‘talk tools’ – is a life skill (Dawes, 2012).

Useful talk tools include:

‘What do you think? Why do you think that?’

‘I agree with this, because...’

‘I disagree with this, because...’

‘This reminds me ....’

‘Can you say more about....’

‘What does anyone think of that idea?’

‘I know that.....’

‘Do we all think - ?’



Exploratory talk involves students building on one another's contributions, elaborating ideas and negotiating a range of different points of view.

Responses to Talking Points sometimes involve considering if the statement is 'right' or 'wrong', or if the group is 'uncertain'. Talking Points lists are always rather long, because it is important that all groups have interesting ideas to consider and discuss for the time available. Until students learn how to conduct an exploratory discussion, they may tend to close down discussion, come to a superficial agreement, or not ask one another to contribute. Having lots to talk about means that there is time for the teacher to support struggling groups in their exploratory talk, re-starting their thinking, offering key talk phrases, and asking them to consider ideas more deeply.

Talk groups of three students is ideal. Fours tend to separate into two pairs, and more than four means that not all ideas will be heard. Pairs can conduct exploratory talk but the addition of a third person often provides stimulus, creative friction, and a breadth of experience, to enrich the discussion. The physical space available and a professional knowledge of how students respond to one another will inform decisions about the talk groups.



## **Student instructions for Talking Points discussions**

*Remember that your contribution will help others to learn. Any one of you may be asked to contribute to the plenary discussion*

First choose a reader and read and listen to the Talking Point.

Now think about what this means.

Think how you can put your knowledge or opinions into words.

Give reasons for what you say.

Ask questions.

Concentrate. Reflect on what you hear.

Share what you think with your group.

Listen attentively to others and match or contrast what they say with your own thoughts.

Ask one another to explain, say more, or clarify what has been said.

Sum up the discussion.

Try to establish an agreement.

Decide what you will say in the whole class discussion.



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