Talking to Learn

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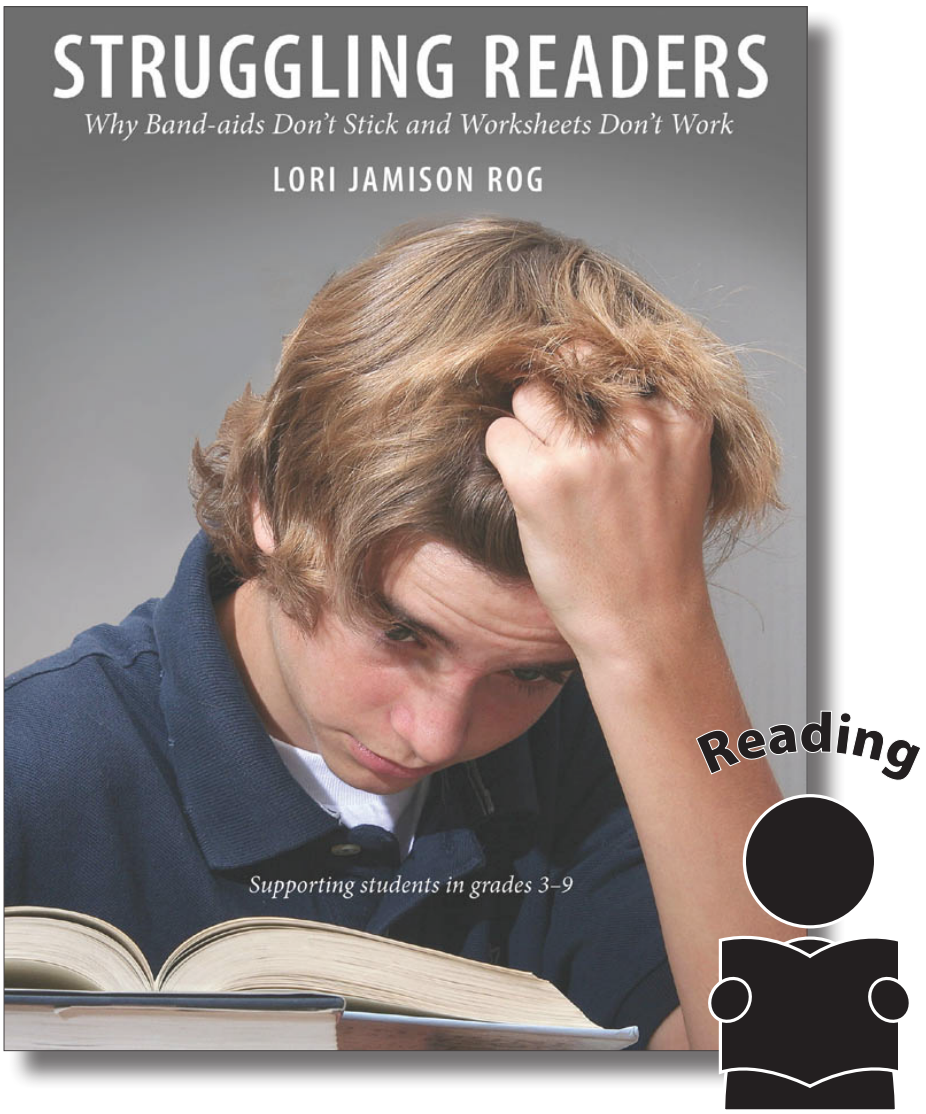

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Talking to Learn

There's no shortage of talk in schools. In fact, some people would argue that our classrooms are saturated with talk. The problem is, in almost every classroom, one person is doing all the talking. Interaction between teacher and students most often consists of the teacher asking a question, calling on one student to respond, then evaluating the response and moving on. In one 1999 study, fewer than 15% of all classroom discussions—and almost none among groups of struggling readers—involved questions that did not have a predetermined correct answer (Nystrand, 1999). In a more recent study, Smith, Hardman, Wall, and Mroz (2004) analyzed 100 classrooms and found that 70% of student responses involved three words or less!

We do know that carefully structured talk can enhance reading comprehension and learning in general. Also called *analytic talk*, *literate talk*, or *dialogic instruction,* effective dialogue engages learners in extended and purposeful conversations to construct meaning, clarify thinking, and collaboratively build new ideas. The teacher's role is to carefully scaffold that discussion, injecting new information as needed, but, more importantly, supporting students as they figure things out on their own. Too often, we've assumed that our struggling readers are not capable of higher-level talk. Yet talking to learn may very well be more appropriate for struggling learners than for anyone else, as it prompts, supports, and scaffolds them as they collaboratively sort out their own thinking. Dialogic instruction is cooperative, not competitive. Students learn, not just to articulate their thinking, but also to listen to others, to allow others time to organize their thinking, to respect alternative points of view, and to express ideas clearly and courteously.

Although teacher talk is reduced in this type of instructional situation, teachers continue to have a very important role in modeling language, inserting guiding questions, and encouraging students to elaborate and explain their thinking. Carefully crafted teacher interactions can inject new ideas, prompt extended thinking, and model appropriate language and behaviors.

There are a number of ways we can adapt existing classroom conversational practices to make them more effective tools for supporting literacy and learning:

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What We Tend to Do	*What We Can do Better*
Assume that students know the norms and behaviors of literate talk and focus only on the content of the discussion.	Model, demonstrate, and practice behaviors of taking turns, asking questions, allowing others time to think and elaborate, stating ideas clearly, and disagreeing politely.
Ask a lot of questions that require brief, right-or-wrong answers.	Craft our prompts and questions to raise the length and level of student responses.
Accept superficial or unsupported responses.	Always encourage elaboration and/or support for thinking.
Expect immediate responses; recognize those who raise their hands or call out most quickly.	Give students the time they need to formulate their ideas and to elaborate on their responses; use wait time both before and after responding.
Fill silences with teacher talk.	Get comfortable with silences for thinking, reflecting, and processing ideas.
Respond with vague praise such as "Good" or "Mmmm."	Avoid passing value judgments on responses; instead, restate key ideas and probe further.
Use the same vocabulary as the students.	Incorporate more complex vocabulary and sentence structure into prompting, restating, or responding.

Think–Pair–Share

The problem with any kind of group discussion is that it's easy for one or two students to dominate the conversation and for others to disengage entirely. As teachers, we need a system for ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity—and responsibility—to participate in the discussion. Think–Pair–Share was developed many years ago by Frank Lyman (1981) as a way to involve all students in classroom discussion.

The think–pair–share structure has three parts:

Think: Reflect on your own ideas
Pair: Discuss your ideas with a partner
Share: Bring your thoughts to the group

1. Students are given a brief time (less than a minute) to individually reflect on a problem or question.
2. They discuss these thoughts with a partner for a longer time.
3. They have an opportunity to share their ideas with a larger group.

Alternatives to think–pair–share include think–pair–draw–share or think–pair–write–share.

Sometimes we might have pairs combine into groups of four for sharing; at other times we might invite specific individuals to share their ideas; and sometimes we might not move into large-group sharing at all, if it seems that the paired discussion has been adequate.

I use this protocol, which I call Talk To Your Neighbor or TTYN, as a standard routine for any higher-level discussion. The research on think–pair–share shows that this structure increases student participation in discussions and increases

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the level of their thinking (Lyman, 1981). It addresses the needs of those who need a few minutes to compose their thoughts before articulating them, as well as the needs of those who need to talk through their thinking. It is particularly important for struggling readers to have an opportunity to organize, rehearse, and try out their thinking before sharing it publicly—and it doesn't hurt for other students either. In fact, Lyman's research suggests that this routine increases both participation and higher-level thinking for all students. The added benefit is that large-group discussions are more focused and efficient.

Organizing Partner Talk

In pairing students for TTYN (Talk To Your Neighbor) or Think–Pair–Share, find a system that works for you and is quick, efficient, and random. Don't leave it up to students to choose partners and don't bother trying to match students of similar reading levels. I use a system of *partner sticks*, or craft sticks with colored dots at the bottom. Each student draws a partner stick at random and is automatically paired with the person who has the stick with the same-colored dot. (You can do the same thing by randomly dealing from a deck of playing cards.) Pairing students in this way allow them to experience working with a range of different partners, and no one gets left out.

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Prompts for Thinking Aloud

- This reminds me of…
- In my background knowledge, I know…
- I'm predicting that…
- I'm inferring that…
- I'm wondering…
- Why is/why did…
- Should/shouldn't there be…?
- What happened to…?
- I was/wasn't expecting…
- I can just picture…
- I'm a little confused here…
- I'm not sure of…
- The key idea here is…
- This is worth remembering, I think:…
- I think that the author…
- I need to go back and reread that part…
- Remember when it said…
- I love the way the author…
- I was thinking that…but now I'm thinking that…
- The most important message here is…

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