

# Student Conversations Are Learning

## Introduction

The “teacher talk” model of education is still the most prevalent in classrooms today. As a result, young employees arrive in the workforce unprepared for 21<sup>st</sup>-century work tasks, and businesses spend billions of dollars a year providing remedial training (Handel, 2005, as cited in Gibbs, 2006). A typical school day might provide only a few minutes for students to talk about what they are learning (Gibbs, 2006). On the other hand, student conversations, when supported by cooperative learning structures, have gained a reputation for developing skills in learners that are relevant to success in today’s society. Social skills, problem-solving skills, cultural competency, and increased self-efficacy are all supported when students work together in the classroom (Chiu, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Nemeth-Wachtler, 1983; Sharan, 2010; Huber & Snider, 2006).

## Conversations Show Learning

While recording and coding student conversations, researchers have noticed that student understanding of complex issues changes as the conversation is happening. When students discuss their learning, that learning is made visible to themselves, helping them to develop metacognitive skills. When students converse about a complex

issue or concept, they understand it better (Chiu, 2008; Resnick, Michaels, & Connor, 2010). This visible learning is also valuable for the instructor, who can see students’ prior understandings and misconceptions and how their knowledge changes over the course of a lesson.

## Practice Regulating Conflict and Solving Problems

When considering if and how to construct group activities in the classroom, teachers often consider relational conflicts as a threat to cooperation (Koutselini, 2008). However, meaningful intellectual conflict can be constructed in such a way that it outweighs and mediates the presence of other kinds of conflict (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). In one study where students worked in groups to solve a complex mathematics problem, disagreements tended to increase the likelihood of correct contributions and better rationales to problem solving, so long as students were polite (Chiu, 2008). In another study where treatment groups were exposed to minority contributions that were both correct and incorrect in relation to the problem, these groups’ solutions reached deeper and more nuanced justifications than in control groups with no minority contribution (Nemeth & Wachtler, 1983). Both cases suggest that intellectual conflict is beneficial to academic outcomes, such as representing complexity in problem solving and synthesizing diverse perspectives.

## Conclusion

Giving students time and space in the classroom for conversation can result in academic benefits for students and additional benefits for teachers. When student conversations are an integrated part of the learning, students can practice working with others, being accountable to others, listening, sharing their ideas in ways that others can understand, and working together to make

decisions (Gillies, 2016; Resnick, Michaels, & Connor, 2010; Gibbs, 2006). The learning that results from student conversations increases student motivation, self-esteem, and problem-solving outcomes. For teachers, giving students a space to speak gives insight into how students are organizing their thoughts and can serve as a formative assessment of what students are learning over the course of a lesson.

## References

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