

Talking about text: Changing patterns of discourse in low-decile secondary classrooms

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Intro / Project description

Talk about Text was a design-based research project that sought to find out about and promote rich, authentic discussion about subject-area texts. The project was a partnership between Aaron and Jacinta from the Woolf Fisher Research Centre and six secondary teachers. The teachers worked in two high schools in Auckland, one decile 1 and one decile 2, and taught biology, chemistry, English, health or physical education to Year 12 or 13 students. The majority of students (60-70%) were Pasifika or Māori (25-28%).

Aims of the project

The aim of this study was to investigate and improve patterns of talk about text in their subject-specialised classrooms. Together with the teachers, we wanted to find out about current patterns of talk about text in the classrooms, and about their and their students' perceptions of factors that helped and hindered such talk. Then we designed and implemented new approaches and investigated the effectiveness of these.

Why is this research important?

Research suggests that talk about text can be a powerful way to build students' subject knowledge and their subject-literacy. But such talk happens rarely in most secondary classrooms; teachers and students find it difficult to break the pattern of "IRE" in which a teacher Initiates – student Responds-teacher Evaluates. We hoped that a design-based approach within a partnership between researchers and teachers would help the teachers develop new and more effective approaches for talk about text, and generate knowledge useful more generally.

What we did

To find out about current patterns of talk about text, we observed and analysed discussions with each of the teachers. We analysed the transcripts to explore features such as the balance of student to teacher talk, the types of questions and prompts teachers used, the extent to which students contributed elaborated responses and the extent to which texts themselves featured in the discussions. To find out what students and teachers thought about talk about text and about factors that helped and hindered such talk, we conducted interviews and a questionnaire with students. We found out about patterns of student achievement by analysing specific NCEA achievement standards offered in the classes that have a high subject-literacy component. We analysed the profiling data and designed approaches that built on identified strengths and addressed identified needs. To investigate shifts over time we used a repeated measures design with key measures collected four times over two years.



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Key findings

At the beginning, teachers and students highly valued talk but did not have a focus on talk about text in particular. Talk was teacher-dominated and student responses were short and unelaborated. Key barriers were that many students felt reluctant to talk for fear of being "mocked" mostly for fear of being wrong. They preferred a talk format where the teacher facilitated small group talk but this format was rarely used; when small group talk occurred the teacher tended to rove and was seldom with the group for an extended period of time.

The approach we designed in partnership with the teachers used a small-group teacher-facilitated format and framed talk around text sets rather than single texts. Students were invited to suggest class protocols and "talk moves" they and their teachers could use.

At the end, students and teachers were positive about the use of text sets and the small group TaT format. Students spoke more in the discussions than they had at the beginning and more of their responses were elaborated responses with explanation, evidence and examples. Teachers and students both referred to the texts more. Teachers asked more open-ended questions. Teachers reported more time spent reading and talking about texts. NCEA pass rates for the indicator standards were in almost all cases higher than previous years and non-project classes.

Implications for practice

Students really benefit from more rich talk about text. We recommend that teachers and leaders wishing to improve talk about text in their settings use a profiling approach where they observe discussions to identify patterns in detail. Teachers found data about their own discussions to be confronting and powerful. We also recommend that student voice is used more: the students' suggestions were insightful and important. The use of small-group teacher-facilitated formats and text sets were key aspects of our approach.

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