

Talking about books

SETTING THE CONTEXT:

I do not teach Honors, AP or IB English classes. The only English classes I teach are the ones students take because they have to, not because they want to. For many of my students, in terms of difficulty, English as a subject is somewhere between occasionally problematic and frequently frustrating. Suffice to say they are not the type of students who require reining in because they are just too eager to share their literary opinions during classroom discussions. “I know how excited you all are to have a meaningful and respectful discourse about the book we are reading, but you’ll just need to wait your turn,” has never once been said in my class. Not by me, anyway. Some days, getting students to talk is like asking them to give up their cell phones for the day. Since my students do not readily participate in such discussion, I am always looking for other ways to engage them in conversations about books.

I have found three strategies that work particularly well to get all students in on the conversation: Turn and Talk, Save the Last Word for Me and Fishbowl.

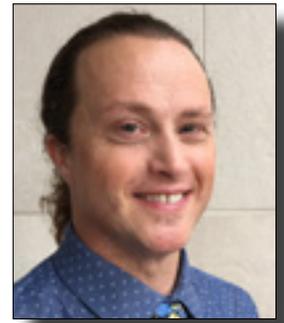
1 **TURN AND TALK** is a staple in my classroom. It is a great way to get all students engaged in learning. It provides a ready listener for students who will not speak in the whole-class setting. This works especially well for ESL students and those with learning disabilities. When students share their ideas one-on-one, teachers can be assured that everyone is participating in the discussion. As the name suggests, this strategy calls for teachers to ask their students to turn and talk about a specific question. If you are doing a read-aloud and want to double-up, ask students to turn to their elbow partner and make a prediction about what might happen next or why they think a character did what he or she did. Be sure to establish norms first. Turn and talk can transform sit-and-get into engaged learning with just a few short pauses and some well-chosen questions.

2 **SAVE THE LAST WORD FOR ME** has been a favorite of mine since I read about it in Doug Buehl’s “Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning.” Where he got it, I cannot recall. The activity allows students the opportunity to get into a discussion about something they’ve read, to be reflective in the reading they’ve done, and to hear and consider classmates’ views before sharing their own. It works best with texts that allow for various interpretations or opinions. I modify it to suit learning targets and for whatever text or standard I am trying to emphasize.

The procedure is this:

1. Assign a text and ask students to select from three to five statements based on whatever criteria you establish [anything from whatever they find interesting, to author’s purpose, to theme, etc. Give them several criteria to choose from].
2. I give each student an index card in advance. You could have students select passages beforehand and make this step part of your in-class procedure for the day-of. Have students write the statements they selected [with page numbers] on the front of the card. On the opposite side, have them write their comments about the passage, or why they selected each particular passage. Passages on one side, comments about the passages on the other.
3. Break students into groups of four or five. The student who goes first will identify the passage so everyone can turn to the page. Then, that student will read the passage aloud to the group. Each student must comment on the passage before the student who selected it offers his or her comment; hence, that student gets the “last word.”
4. Continue this process until everyone in the group has shared. If you have time, mix up the groups and start again.

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FOR CLASS >> *continued*

3 **FISHBOWL** is not just for debate. If you've been afraid to try it with literature, don't be. Whereas **Turn and Talk** is great for partners, and **Save the Last Word for Me** works well for small groups, Fishbowl is perfect for whole class discussions where an abundance of voices enrich the quality of the conversation. I have used Fishbowl discussion as an end-of-unit summative assessment and for mid-novel formative assessments to suit any number of purposes.

To begin, I give students a list of 30-40, open-ended questions about topics or themes covered in the novel or section. I do this in advance and give them a class period to prepare notes if we are doing it at the end of the novel. (This removes some of the anxiety and gets them back into the book, rereading and doing some research.) I tell them there is no way they will answer all of the questions, but they should be prepared to discuss any of them. Students should come to the Fishbowl with their notes, their books, and annotations to help support the ideas and answers in their notes.

I arrange the classroom with about 15 chairs in the middle and tables (or desks) outside the ring of chairs. The chairs are the inside of the fishbowl and the tables are the outside the fishbowl. The "readiest" students self-select to go on the inside. Those on the inside each get a random slip of paper with one of the questions they prepared for.

Prior to starting the discussion, I give everyone on the inside a minute or two to locate a page in the book to reference when they answer their question.

When everyone is ready, a volunteer will cite a page in the book (which everyone turns to) and then answers his or her question.

Next, those on the inside have the option of: 1) building on the idea, 2) agreeing, 3) disagreeing, or 4) posing a question to a previous respondent on that topic.

To facilitate the conversation inside the fishbowl, I provide students with a half-page Discussion Frames cheat sheet. I also have a supply of rescue questions on standby in case the topic gets stale. I use a rubric that rewards "raising points and ideas" (I look for at least four) and for "reasoning and ideas" (similarly, I look for four specific citations or a combination of general references and specific citations).

I give students on the outside of the fishbowl a Column Notes graphic organizer to keep them engaged in the discussion. Having the ability to pilfer citations from the group on the inside should also be a good motivator to remain engaged.

At the half-way point, I switch the groups; those outside the fishbowl go inside the fishbowl, and vice versa. There are multiple ways to organize this activity, and this just happens to be how it works for me.

If you have any questions or want to know more about how I use these strategies in my classroom, please email me at bradbryan@tomah.education.

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