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Structures for Active Participation and Learning During Language Arts Instruction

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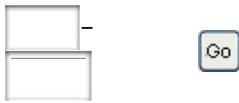
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INTRODUCTION: A RATIONALE FOR STRUCTURED ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

English Language Arts discussions and activities are often less than democratic or engaging in heterogeneous secondary classrooms. More academically prepared and confident learners can tend to dominate both unified-class discussions and small-group activities. Students who are at all insecure about their subject-matter preparation or English language skills may elect to remain passive, waiting for the classmates who are always ready to respond to speak up. Furthermore, English language learners and other students who are not strong auditory processors need considerable wait time to process a question and frame an answer, but this instructional support is rarely factored into traditional class discussions. Similarly, many competent yet highly analytical and reflective learners require additional processing time and tranquility to incubate after being presented with a problem or question. If impetuous or loquacious students are regularly allowed to blurt out answers, other more reflective or reticent participants are left with little time or incentive for critical thinking and engagement. When this instructional dynamic is revisited on a routine basis, less assertive or proficient students are denied the interaction and affirmation that will encourage them to take greater social and academic risks and make vibrant classroom contributions.

CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION STRUCTURES

There are a number of strategies teachers can manageably integrate into their daily Language Arts lessons to encourage more active and productive learning from all students. These participation structures involve students in dynamic interaction and construction of knowledge by drawing upon a repertoire of oral and written language skills. Each structure, while easy to implement, builds in the conscientious scaffolding necessary for less proficient students to channel their energy and participate more productively in every lesson phase. These structures offer efficient and effective formats for independent seatwork, partner sharing, small group brainstorming and problem solving, and unified class debriefing. Several are adaptations of cooperative structures designed by Spencer Kagan and his colleagues, with a viable research base to support their use in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms.¹

Unlike traditional brainstorming and discussion formats, these highly structured activities build in quiet time for independent reflection and recording of thoughts prior to discussion. This "prepared participation" rewards mature reflection rather than spontaneity and builds in a sense of accountability for all students to contribute. Besides creating conditions for more active, responsible learning, the cooperative and task-based nature of these structures helps to promote a safe and supportive context for reticent participants to get their ideas expressed and recognized. The more eclectic range of responses in turn raises the interest level of the class, while preparing students with relevant background knowledge for a subsequent reading or writing task.

Students' confidence and productivity in these interactive structures can be greatly enhanced by instructional "front-loading" in relevant and appropriate language strategies for affirming, seeking clarification, paraphrasing, and so on. Many students, in particular English language learners, will not be familiar with these critical language functions for classroom interaction and learning, as they are used less commonly in casual social interactions on the playground and in the cafeteria. However, the ability to use these communicative strategies is a key to success in the middle-grades Language Arts classroom and other academic and formal social contexts. To support students in comfortably using these strategies, introduce and practice a few new expressions at a time, prior to having students engage in a structure that requires this authentic language. Keep these language strategies posted in the classroom for easy reference during lessons and affirm students' efforts to apply them.

¹ Kagan, Spencer. *Cooperative Learning Resources for Teachers*. San

Juan Capistrano, CA: Kagan Cooperative Learning, 1992. *See also* Harmin, M. *Strategies to Inspire Active Learning*. Edwardsville, IL: Inspiring Strategy Institute, 1995.

LANGUAGE STRATEGIES FOR ACTIVE CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION

Expressing an Opinion

I think/believe that ...
It seems to me that ...
In my opinion ...

Asking for Clarification

What do you mean?
Will you explain that again?
I have a question about that.

Soliciting a Response

What do you think?
We haven't heard from you yet.
Do you agree?
What answer did you get?

Individual Reporting

I discovered from ____ that ...
I found out from ____ that ...
____ pointed out to me that ...
____ shared with me that ...

Disagreeing

I don't agree with you because...
I got a different answer.
I see it another way.

Affirming

That's an interesting idea.
I hadn't thought of that.
I see what you mean.

Predicting

I guess/predict/imagine that ...
Based on ..., I infer that ...
I hypothesize that ...

Paraphrasing

So you are saying that ...
In other words, you think ...
What I hear you saying is ...

Acknowledging Ideas

My idea is similar to/related to ____'s idea.
I agree with ____ that ...
My idea builds upon ____'s idea.

Partner and Group Reporting

We decided/agreed that ...
We concluded that ...
Our group sees it differently.
We had a different approach.

Offering a Suggestion

Maybe we could ...
What if we ...
Here's something we might try.

Holding the Floor

As I was saying, ...
If I could finish my thought ...
What I was trying to say was ...

WHIP-AROUND (OR IDEA WAVE)

- Students listen while the teacher poses a question or a task.
- Students are given quiet time to consider what they know about the topic and record a number of possible responses. This may be a simple list of words and phrases or a focused quick-write. It is also helpful to provide students with a series of response prompts to complete prior to being asked to share aloud. In this way, less proficient academic language users will have a linguistic scaffold to bolster their linguistic output along with their confidence in sharing aloud. For example, if students are being asked to make predictions about what will happen in the next chapter of *The Joy*

Luck Club, they might be provided with these sentence prompts to complete: I predict that Waverly's mother will be disappointed in/proud of her daughter's behavior because ...; Based on Waverly's relationship with her mother, I assume that her mother will react very positively/negatively because

- The teacher whips around the class in a relatively fast-paced and structured manner (e.g., down rows, around tables), allowing as many students as possible to share an idea in 15 seconds or less.
- After several contributions, there tends to be some repetition. Students point out similarities in responses using appropriate language strategies (e.g., My idea is similar to/related to ...), rather than simply stating that their ideas have already been mentioned. This fosters active listening and validation of ideas.
- The teacher can record these ideas for subsequent review, or have students do a quick-write summarizing some of the more interesting contributions they heard during the discussion.

THINK (WRITE)-PAIR-SHARE (OR PRIVATE-PARTNER-PUBLIC)

- Students listen while the teacher poses a question or a task.
- Students are given quiet time to first answer the question individually, ideally in writing.
- Students are then cued to pair with a neighbor and discuss their responses, noting similarities and differences. Students encourage their partners to clarify and justify responses using appropriate language strategies (e.g., How did you decide that?; In other words, you think that...). It is often helpful to structure the roles (first speaker, first listener) and designate the time frames (e.g. "First speakers, you have 90 seconds to share your answers with your partner ...").
- After rehearsing responses with a partner, students are invited to share with the class.

NUMBERED HEADS

- Students number off in teams, one through four.
- The teacher asks a series of questions, one at a time.
- Students discuss possible answers to each question for an established amount of time (about 30 seconds to 90 seconds, depending on the complexity of the task).
- The teacher calls a number (1–4), and all students with that number raise their hand, ready to respond.
- The teacher randomly calls on students with the specified number to answer on behalf of their team.
- Students are encouraged to acknowledge similarities and differences between their team's response and that of other

teams (e.g., We predicted a very different outcome.; Our reaction was similar to that of Ana's group.).

- The teacher continues posing questions and soliciting responses in this manner until the brainstorming or review session is finished.

GIVE ONE AND GET ONE

- Students listen while the teacher poses a question or a brainstorming task.
- Students are given quiet time to consider what they know about the topic and record a number of possible responses. This may be a simple list of words and phrases or a series of complete sentences.
- Students draw a line after their final idea to clearly delineate their own ideas from those that they are going to gather from classmates.
- Students are given a set amount of time (about 8–10 minutes) to get out of their seats and share ideas with classmates. After finding a partner, the two students exchange papers and quietly read each other's ideas. They comment upon anything of particular interest on their partner's list or ask for clarification about anything confusing. Students then select one idea from their partner's list and add it to their own, making sure to understand and accurately copy the idea alongside the partner's name, because they may be called upon to share one new idea during the follow-up debriefing session. When one exchange has been completed, students move on to interact with a new partner.
- At the end of the "Give One and Get One" exchange period, the teacher facilitates a unified-class debriefing of ideas. The teacher calls on a volunteer who shares one new idea acquired from a conversation partner, utilizing language for classroom reporting (e.g., "I found out from Alex that..."; "Sylvia mentioned that ..."). The student whose idea has just been reported shares the next idea, gleaned from a different conversation partner. This highly structured debriefing encourages active listening as students are eager to see when their name and idea will be mentioned. Students should strive to share an idea from a classmate who has not yet been acknowledged.
- The teacher records the successive contributions on the board, making sure to write the name of the student next to his/her idea. This relatively random listing can subsequently be restructured in a graphic organizer and used as a springboard to an independent reading or writing task.

OUTCOME STATEMENTS

- Students in the middle grades often have a difficult time

summarizing focal lesson content, monitoring their understanding and use of new strategies, and reflecting critically on their learning. This structure encourages students to review a class session and reflect meaningfully on the day's discussion and activities, while also providing the teacher with productive feedback on instruction.

- The teacher provides students with a series of prompts to complete written "Outcome Statements" about the day's lesson. Possible prompts might include the following:

I now understand how to ...

I was surprised by ...

I am beginning to wonder why ...

I would like to know more about ...

I can see the connections between ...

I would like some help with ...

I'm becoming more confident about ...

- Students write two or three detailed Outcome Statements about new insights, observations, or sources of confusion, which could then be shared during a Whip-around or a Think-Pair-Share. Either option could lead into a unified-class summary discussion, with the teacher synthesizing and elaborating where necessary.
- These written reflections can also be turned in to enable the teacher to identify any areas in need of review or clarification. Students who may feel reticent to seek clarification or assistance during a class session are provided with a safe venue for expressing their needs and concerns.

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