

Practice Guide

Dialogic Reasoning

Student Talk That Promotes Language Development and Text Comprehension



The Carolyn A. and Peter S. Lynch School of Education
Boston College



Developed by the ELICIT Collaborative

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All names used are pseudonyms.

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The ELICIT Collaborative

The ELICIT Collaborative is a group of principals, teachers, and researchers in the Boston Public Schools who have worked together for years in the service of promoting quality literacy instruction for multilingual students. Participating members of the ELICIT Collaborative are:

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Resources

For more information on using dialogic reasoning in elementary classrooms, see the following resources.

Clark, A. M., Anderson, R. C., Kuo, L., Kim, I., Archodidou, A., & Nguyen-Jahiel, K. (2003). Collaborative reasoning: Expanding ways for children to talk and think in school. *Educational Psychology Review*, 15(2), 181-198.

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Reznitskaya, A. (2011). Dialogic teaching: Rethinking language use during literature discussions. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(7), 446-456.

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- Demonstrate control of the mechanics, conventions, and spelling of written English
 - *Second language learners' participation in dialogic reasoning discussions promotes active language use and growth toward achieving this Standard
- 2. Knowledge of Language
 - Apply knowledge of language in varying contexts for appropriate meaning or style, and in support of reading and listening comprehension
- 3. Vocabulary Acquisition and Use
 - Use context clues, structural analysis, and appropriate reference materials to determine meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases
 - Demonstrate understanding of figurative language and words with multiple meanings
 - Apply knowledge of academic language when speaking, listening, reading, and writing

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extended time frames (i.e., to adequately research a topic and to engage in the writing process) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or one or two days)

Speaking & Listening Standards

- I. Comprehension and Collaboration
 - Prepare for and effectively participate in a range of conversations and collaborations and with various partners
 - Engage in discussions through which to build on others' ideas and to clearly and persuasively express ideas.
 - Evaluate another's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence
2. Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas
 - Present information, findings, and supporting evidence so that listeners can recognize the line of reasoning and progression of ideas
 - Use style, organization, and development that are appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience
 - Adapt speech to various tasks and contexts
 - Demonstrate appropriate control of formal English

Language Standards

- I. Conventions of Standard English
 - Demonstrate appropriate control of standard English (grammar and usage) in both speaking and writing

- Determine if there is sufficient evidence
 - Analyze similarities and differences across texts in terms of topic, themes, and general information, to build knowledge and/or compare authors' approaches
4. Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity
- Read and comprehend rich texts in multiple genres (including both literary and information texts)

Writing Standards (when linked to a written response)

1. Text Types and Purposes
- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts
 - Use reasoning to support claims by selecting relevant and sufficient evidence
 - Select, organize and analyze content in order to write informative/explanatory and/or argumentative texts
2. Production and Distribution of Writing
- Produce clear and coherent written texts that have been developed and organized appropriately for the task's purpose and the target audience
3. Research to Build and Present Knowledge
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research
4. Range of Writing
- Routinely write for a variety of purposes and for both

Introduction

Ms. Price's Classroom

A small group of students in Ms. Price's third grade classroom is discussing the story Old Cricket by Lisa Wheeler and Pondel Goebel. It's the story of a cricket who thinks he is clever because he claims a series of injuries that prevent him from helping others in his community. He explains that he has pains in his neck, back, and head to excuse himself from responsibility. When he meets a hungry crow, he does everything he can to avoid getting eaten, and, in the process, incurs the very injuries he pretended to have previously. When the class finishes the work of reading and understanding the text, Ms. Price creates small groups of 4 – 6 students and challenges them to discuss the following question: Do you think Old Cricket is clever or foolish? The following is an excerpt from one of those discussion groups.

* * *

Carlos: All right, the question today is about the story called Old Cricket, and there is this cricket that is lazy, and the question is: Do you think he is clever or foolish? Well, I think he's clever, because he tricked all the

animals and outsmarted the crow. (He turns to the girl sitting beside him.)

Jenny: Well, I disagree with Carlos. I think he's foolish, because he tricked his cousin that he had a cramp and a cough and his back hurt to not work.

Carlos: So, that's why he's clever, because he tricked them saying that he had a cramp and a cough.

Shawn: I agree with Carlos that he is clever, 'cause he tricked some of the animals to give him food, and at the end of the story he made the crow choke.

Lisa: I think he's foolish, because if he had worked and built his house, the crow would not have chased him.

Carlos: I disagree with you, because if he had built the house in the first place, that wouldn't make the story interesting.

Jenny: I disagree with Carlos, because the crow came and then he got his own self hurt.

Carlos: But Jenny, if the cricket isn't clever, how could he get away from the crow?

Shawn: I agree with Carlos, because if the cricket were foolish he would not be able to outsmart the crow, and he wouldn't be able to trick his friends.

Jenny: I disagree with Shawn. The cricket is lazy. That is

Common Core State Standards

When Dialogic Reasoning discussions are routinely built into instruction, teachers link reading, writing, speaking, listening, and academic language use with classroom content to strengthen student learning and, at the same time, meet the demands of the standards. The following list identifies the anchor standards for English Language Arts supported by dialogic reasoning.

Reading Standards

1. Key Ideas and Details
 - Read closely and cite textual evidence
 - Support conclusions drawn from the text with evidence
2. Craft and Structure
 - Interpret words and phrases in the text and analyze how word choices influence the text's meaning
3. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas
 - Delineate and evaluate the argument and claims in the text

- Was Clark fair to York?

My Name is María Isabel by Alma Flor Ada and K. Dyble Thompson

- Was the teacher's decision to change María Isabel's name correct?

Fighting for Freedom by Ian Morrison

- Should people disobey unfair laws?

Should There Be Zoos? by Tony Stead

- Should there be zoos?

Shiloh by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

- Should Marty have hidden Shiloh?

why he didn't wanna do no work. He didn't want to fix the roof, he didn't want to help his cousin, he didn't want to find corn.

Alma: I think he was foolish, because he pretended to be hurt.

Carlos: Alma, I disagree with you, because if he were foolish he would have gotten eaten up by the crow right off the bat. He was not foolish, he was clever, that's why he ran away from the crow, and that's when he really broke his back. And that's when he was smart and clever and went to the doctor. If he were foolish, he wouldn't have gotten all the food, like Shawn said, he wouldn't have tricked all the animals, he wouldn't have gotten away from the bird. It's all these stuff that makes him clever.

Mrs. Price: You know what, though? I'm just going to go against for a second. He ended up getting hurt. Don't you find that ironic? You know he pretended he was hurt all along, and then he ended up really hurting himself. That's not that clever? I don't know. What do you think?

Jenny: Yeah, I agree with Carlos now. He's clever because he threw food at the crow to make him choke, and not come after him and kill him.

Carlos: I really agree with Jenny because if he was foolish, then he wouldn't have been smart and throw the

food at the bird to make him choke.

* * *

During this example of a dialogic reasoning discussion, students took charge of the conversation, spoke freely to each other, and built on each other's ideas. They shared their positions about the central question, and supported them with evidence from the text. After listening to her peers, Jenny decided to change her mind about Cricket's cleverness. The teacher was another participant in the discussion and contributed alternative perspectives to stimulate and extend the discussion.

This practice guide provides an introduction to promoting student-led, dialogic reasoning discussions in elementary school classrooms. The following sections offer an overview of dialogic reasoning discussions, tips on getting started, and suggestions for how to best facilitate these discussions. The primary objective of this guide is to prepare educators for beginning the process of implementing dialogic reasoning discussions in their classrooms.

- Do you think Warthog is fair to Anansi?

The Ant and the Grasshopper: An Aesop's Fable retold by Tom Paxton and illustrated by Phillip Webb

- Should the ants share their food with Grasshopper?

Hey, Little Ant by Phillip M. Hoose, Hannah Hoose, and Debbie Tilley

- Should the kid squish Little Ant?

Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type by Doreen Cronin and illustrated by Betsy Lewin

- Was it okay for the cows to go on strike?

Third, Fourth, and Fifth Grade

Tops and Bottoms adapted and illustrated by Janet Stevens

- In this story Hare tries to trick Bear. Does Bear deserve it?

Old Cricket by Lisa Wheeler and illustrated by Ponder Goebel

- Was Cricket clever or foolish?

A Day's Work by Eve Bunting and illustrated by Ronald Himler

- Was Francisco's decision to lie for work the right decision?

American Slave, American Hero: York of the Lewis and Clark Expedition by Laurence Pringle, Cornelius Van Wright, and Ying-Hwa Hu.

Sample Texts & Questions

This list contains texts and questions that teachers of different elementary grades have found good for engaging their students in dialogic reasoning discussions. Teachers have selected these books because they promote reflection about problems such as fairness, lying, or cheating, or present different perspectives on social issues in diverse areas such as the treatment of animals, immigration, and civil rights.

Kindergarten, First, and Second Grade

Leola and the Honeybears: An African-American Retelling of Goldilocks and the Three Bear by Melodye Rosales

- Did Leola make a good decision when she went in the Honeybears' Inn?

The Bravest Dog Ever: The True Story of Balto by Natalie Standiford and illustrated by Donald Cook

- Do you think they should have had a relay race to bring medicine to Nome?

Anansi Goes Fishing retold by Janet Stevens

Section One

What Is Dialogic Reasoning?

Dialogic reasoning discussions allow students to develop and deepen their understanding of text in small, student-centered groups. Rather than responding to teacher-driven questions, dialogic reasoning discussions begin with a “big” question; often a yes or no question to which there is no correct answer, that requires students to: 1) take a position; and 2) use evidence from the text to defend his or her stance.

What Do Students Do During Dialogic Reasoning Discussions?

In dialogic reasoning discussions, students speak freely without raising their hands or waiting to be nominated to speak by the teacher. Over time, students assume responsibility for their own judgments about which positions and arguments are stronger than others. Ultimately, students are encouraged to manage all aspects of discussion as independently as possible. They are expected to present their position on the big question, support their positions with reasons and

evidence from the text, and carefully listen to other opinions. Good discussions result in students evaluating and responding to one another's arguments, and challenging each other respectfully when they disagree.

What Does The Teacher Do During Dialogic Reasoning Discussions?

The teacher's role as facilitator is key to ensuring students' thoughtful and focused engagement. The teacher steps into and out of the discussion as needed to keep students focused on the big question and the text, to prompt deeper thinking about a particular claim, to offer alternative viewpoints to consider, and to ensure that students follow the expectations of participation. Section Three presents different scaffolding moves that teachers may use to facilitate effective discussions. The amount and nature of teacher participation will vary depending on students' experience in engaging in discussions, the difficulty of the texts, and the concepts being discussed.

What Are The Expectations For Participating In Dialogic Reasoning Discussions?

Dialogic Reasoning Discussions have several ground rules. First, students should be encouraged to speak freely without being nominated by the teacher. Second, interruptions are discouraged to allow respect for the person who holds the floor, and provide the speaker with

Section Five

Conclusion

Dialogic reasoning discussions can serve as an important means to promote language use in classrooms. While a great deal of instruction is teacher-driven, implementing dialogic reasoning discussions in classrooms can open up instruction to include students as drivers of text-based inquiry, while also promoting a strong focus on language productivity, which can be particularly helpful for English learning children who need to practice language in order to acquire it.

Section Four

Including English Language Learners

There is strong research evidence that suggests that English learners benefit from opportunities to talk about content in pairs or small groups (Baker et al., 2014). Their participation in these discussions not only enables them to practice the language that they are learning, but also provides a formative assessment tool for teachers to gauge their understanding. It is likely most efficient to organize students in heterogeneous groups. This grouping will enable more proficient students to model language for students with lower proficiencies.

English learners also benefit from writing opportunities that enable them to extend their understanding of new content (Baker et al., 2014). It is wise to encourage students to write before and/or after participating in dialogic reasoning discussions. For example, students might use a graphic organizer to get prepared for the discussion. After the discussion, students may write an argumentative text in which they integrate new ideas from their dialogic reasoning experience.

sufficient time to convey his or her idea. Third, all group members should be encouraged (though not required) to participate in the discussion. Fourth, students should be urged to consider all sides of an issue. And, finally, students should respond to the ideas they hear, rather than the individual who presents the ideas.

What Types Of Texts Work For Dialogic Reasoning Discussions?

Any text type can work for a dialogic reasoning discussion. Whether the text be narrative, informational, science- or social studies-based, the key factor is that the text be comprehended by all students, and that it have sufficient grist (Resnick, Matsumura, & Junker, 2006) for a rich discussion. Grist refers to texts that present multi-layered issues such as justice, fairness, equality, honesty, integrity, winning versus losing, and obligations to others, while also offering sufficient evidence for students to be able to generate strong arguments for their positions on the issue.

What Are The Benefits Of Incorporating Dialogic Reasoning Discussions Into Literacy Instruction?

Dialogic reasoning discussions are highly interactive and, when done well, deepen text comprehension (Chinn, Anderson and Waggoner, 2001; Reznitskaya et al, 2009; Wilkinson, Soter & Murphy, 2010) and promote academic language development (August et al., 2009; Vaughn et al., 2009). Children must learn to take and

yield the floor, speak clearly and listen carefully, express reasons and cite evidence to justify positions, issue challenges, and respond to the challenges of others. Dialogic reasoning discussions may be particularly beneficial to English language learners and other students who benefit from meaningful and authentic oral language practice (Baker et al., 2014; Zhang, Anderson, & Nguyen-Janiel, 2013).

Do Dialogic Reasoning Discussions Align With The Common Core State Standards?

Dialogic reasoning discussions encourage students to engage in a range of reading and language practices that support the learning goals of the Common Core State Standards. Dialogic reasoning discussions provide students with a purpose for close reading, opportunities to practice with language through meaningful speaking and listening, and prepare students to write in response to texts. Furthermore, dialogic reasoning discussions can be used across the content areas to engage students in big questions around content-area texts and concepts. The use of dialogic reasoning as part of a classroom's regular literacy instruction can help students meet the K-5 College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking, and Language. For more details on which standards are supported by dialogic reasoning, see the appendix at the end of this guide.

- Some people might say [give a reason from the opposing view point].
- If you were [CHARACTER] would you...
- Sounds like no one has considered the issue from Evelyn's point of view.

Encouraging

The teacher reinforces a particular student move. She or he acknowledges progress in thinking, notices and names effective argumentative elements, as well as observation of discussion norms.

Examples:

- Ray, I like the fact you gave a reason for your position.
- Did you notice the way Johan found evidence in the story to support his position?

Summarizing

The teacher sums up what students have said to help them keep track of the discussion. Initially, teachers may take full responsibility for summing up with the goal of gradually transferring this task to students.

Examples:

- Let's stop for a minute and summarize your main ideas.
- So far you have given two reasons why Old Cricket is clever...

Modeling

The teacher demonstrates reasoning processes by thinking aloud. She/he uses the vocabulary of critical and reflective thinking such as reasons, evidence, argument, and counterargument. The teacher can also model a move she/he would like students to make.

Example:

- When I am thinking about the reasons for my position, I ask myself, 'Do I have evidence from the text? Do I have evidence from my own experiences?'

Asking for Clarification

The teacher asks students to clarify what they mean, particularly when they use vague or imprecise language.

Examples:

- I'm a little confused as to how that fits with your argument. Can you say more?
- Do you mean [X] or [Y]?
- Do you mean to say [paraphrase]...?

Challenging

The teacher presents countering ideas or ideas that have not emerged in the discussion. Challenges are useful when all students are agreeing on a single view, have overlooked an important point, or need a model on how to challenge others respectfully.

Section Two

Getting Started

Dialogic reasoning discussions build on the literacy instruction already occurring in classrooms as children are expected to use comprehension strategies such as making predictions, summarizing, questioning, and drawing conclusions as they participate in the discussion. However, supporting meaningful dialogic reasoning discussions requires a consideration of what will happen before, during, and after discussions. When introducing dialogic reasoning discussions into a classroom, consider the following guidelines.

Develop A Classroom Culture Supports Student Talk

Dialogic reasoning discussions rely on students participating in talk around topics that can elicit a range of opinions and viewpoints. For this kind of talk to be successful, teachers must create a classroom culture that makes students feel comfortable and welcome, encourages respect, and values the responses and views of all students. To develop this culture, teachers must play an active role in modeling and facilitating talk that

is inclusive and supportive of all students. Developing habits of talk that are respectful and responsive to others is also beneficial to other classroom instruction and creates a classroom environment where all students feel invited to participate.

In addition to developing respectful and responsive habits of talk, students must learn the language of argumentation. The use of different language features associated with argumentation, such as “I think” to state a position, “...because...” to present a reason, or “do you agree?” to seek agreement makes student reasoning explicit during the discussion (Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999). Teachers play an active role by modeling different ways in which students can make their reasoning clear during the discussion. These may include modeling appropriate language for stating positions, presenting evidence, challenging other students’ arguments respectfully, and considering other students’ perspectives.

Start With A Good Text And A Good Discussion Question

Not all texts are geared toward asking challenging questions that require students to take a position and defend it with evidence from the text, and not all questions allow students to dig into texts and debate with one another. Consider how these two components – text selection and question development – interact

Section Three

Facilitating Student Talk

Teachers use various talk moves during dialogic reasoning discussions to support students’ engagement. This section includes various ways teachers can participate, including examples of how teachers effectively prompt richer student responses and build student independence during dialogic reasoning discussions (Jadallah et al, 2011; Waggoner et al, 1995).

Prompting

The teacher helps students construct a longer response or a response that includes a position, reason, evidence, or evaluation. This is most useful when students are learning how to discuss.

Examples:

- Why are you thinking that?
- Is there evidence in the story that supports what you are saying?
- Can anyone think of another reason or example?

Finish Discussions With Routines That Signal Closure

Once a discussion has ended, take a poll to see where the group has ended up on a given prompt. Ask how many students changed their minds or not and to briefly explain why or why not. Teachers might also discuss the quality of the discussion itself. Some questions to consider are:

- Was the discussion respectful?
- Was the text used as evidence?
- Were both sides appropriately represented?
- Do children believe they have a deeper understanding of the ideas in the text because of the discussion?

Once a discussion has taken place, follow up with a writing activity in which students compose an answer to the discussion question by providing a position and reasoning with evidence from the text. These can be short responses in students' writing journals or longer compositions that may form the basis of a formal essay. The focus on writing can serve as a form of assessment, that is, did students understand the discussion? Alternatively, writing might be used as a way to deepen children's world knowledge, because writing in response to reading and discussion is likely to result in information recall over longer periods of time.

with each other to lay the groundwork for student participation and engagement. For example, the story *Old Cricket* by Lisa Wheeler and Pondel Goebel raises the issue of whether lying should be considered a clever or a foolish thing to do. While the story does provide ample character development, it does not provide a final answer to this question, thus allowing students to develop their own ideas. Consider also the question, "Is it okay to break an unjust law?" in the context of reading *Fighting for Freedom* by Ian Morrison, about Nelson Mandela and the apartheid system in South Africa. This is another example of the type of text and question that can set up a good dialogic reasoning discussion.

Ensure Comprehension Of The Text And Question

If students are not able to recall and understand the basic ideas in the text prior to the start of the discussion, it will be difficult for them to engage in meaningful talk that draws on the text for evidence and ideas. Consider the nature of the literacy instruction that precedes the discussion: How was the text presented to the students (read aloud, read silently, or both)? Was there any targeted vocabulary or comprehension instruction? While the nature of the literacy instruction that precedes a dialogic reasoning discussion is not the focus of this guide, it is important to think about how you will ensure that students have comprehended the text under discussion.

Of course text comprehension is crucial for effective discussions. But, consider also that if a student has not understood the question that she or he has been asked, then participation will also suffer. Check in with students before beginning the discussion to determine whether they understand the question. Having a student re-voice the question in his or her own words can help to anchor understanding.

Use Graphic Organizers To Prepare To Talk

Individually, in pairs, or in groups of three or more, have students talk and fill out a graphic organizer that allows them to get ready for the discussion. By articulating their ideas about relevant information from the text, formulating their positions, predicting competing positions, and preparing rebuttals, students have the opportunity to carefully build their arguments in advance, and in turn more actively participate in dialogic reasoning discussions.

Provide Access To The Text And Question

Making the text available during the discussion (along with students' notes about the text) allows students to locate evidence to support their ideas, and this, in turn, supports the use of critical and analytical approaches during discussion.

If possible, make sure that students are aware of the

prompt (reminders, visibly displayed) during literacy instruction and during the discussion itself. Making students aware of the prompt beforehand establishes a meaningful context for reading and sets the stage for the discussion to be successful later. Keeping the question in view during the discussion helps to keep students focused.

Extend Discussion Time And Release Responsibility To Students

One major goal of dialogic reasoning discussions is to promote the skills and habits of respectful, targeted, and sometimes contentious, dialogue among students. As students become more familiar and successful with dialogic reasoning, try to pull back and let students do the work of negotiating participation and management of the discussion.

Discussions should grow in length as students become familiar with the format and with generating ideas and responding to their peers. An appropriate metaphor to consider is one of the stamina that derives from exercise. As students practice engaging in discussions, both the quality and length of their discussions should increase. In the upper elementary grades, discussions may last from 15 to 20 minutes, or longer. For younger grades, discussions may last from 5 to 15 minutes, depending on the experience of the students.