

# Real Talk, Real Teaching

*What happens in classrooms when we create the time and space for authentic talk?*

## **Maria Nichols**

**O**n a coaching visit to an energetic 4th grade classroom, I slid into an empty chair and had scarcely opened my notebook when Dominic slammed into the seat next to me and plopped down a copy of *Christmas in the Trenches* by John McCutcheon and Henri Sorensen (Peachtree, 2006). Looking at me with honest intent, he asked, “You’re old, right?”

Torn between indignant denial and the realization that anyone over 15 might appear old to him, I simply asked, “Why?”

Nodding to Luis and Ana, who were now crowding around, and flipping to an illustration showing Allied soldiers hunkered in trenches, he exclaimed, “Here! We think it’s all messed up.”



“Yeah—really bad!” continues Luis, tugging the book over to flip pages. “They have war” (slapping an illustration of battle action for emphasis) “and then they have peace” (slapping an illustration of the Allied and German soldiers playing soccer).

“And then”—Dominic flips to a picture of the Allied soldiers in the trenches—“they go back in the holes to be safe from bullets and stuff. It’s—*whaaaat!*” (shaking his head and flinging his arms in the air with disbelief and more than a touch of drama).

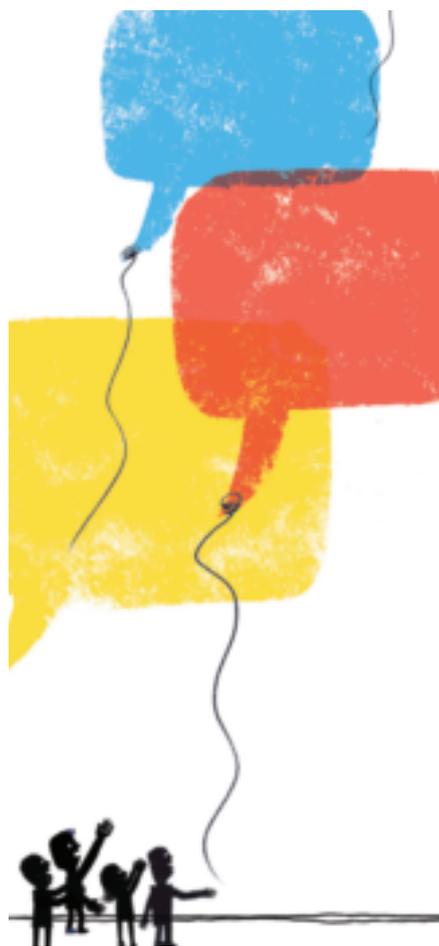
“Yeah,” Luis chimes back in. “We gotta get more thinking. Cuz we—all of us—think it’s messed up!”

Clearly, McCutcheon and Sorensen’s beautifully illustrated account of the fleeting Christmas Truce of 1914 had left Dominic, Luis, and Ana struggling with something more complex than the historical facts. The group was wrestling to understand the actions of the Allied and German soldiers, attempting to get into the characters’ minds.

As compelling as this inquiry was, what was equally striking was the group’s dialogic approach. They were stuck, and they realized that the complexity of their struggle necessitated broadening the conversation. They were searching for a new perspective—in this case, from someone older (as opposed to old, I told myself).

### The Challenges of Real Talk

Dominic, Luis, and Ana were not talking to meet curriculum standards; they were talking to construct understanding. Because these learners, with support from their teacher, had established a learning environment that defined talk in purposeful ways, they had established a repertoire of talk behaviors and habits to help them. Echoing through the classroom



were questions like, “Who haven’t we heard from?” “Who else could you talk to?”—questions first posed by the teacher, but slowly becoming the mantra of students.

Their teacher recognized that deep understanding does not come from single conversations framed by rules, roles, and time limits. Dominic, Luis, and Ana would need multiple texts, perspectives, and conversations, creating space for the extended, collaborative engagement that enables understanding to unfold over time.

Such talk is messy and dynamic. It sparks and then falters as students struggle with complex texts and ideas. The more compelling and controversial the ideas, the deeper

students’ engagement, and the livelier the talk. And the livelier the talk, the greater the probability that predictable problems will arise. Rather than protocoling the energy out of dialogic interactions, our work is to teach into the energy, lifting students’ ability with talk as we strengthen their construction of understanding.

### Five Predictable Problems

#### *Everyone’s Talking at Once*

When students are exploring compelling questions, multiple voices will sometimes clamor for attention. Of course, we could control the process by requiring students to raise their hands, but then students wouldn’t learn how to take charge of the conversational flow. Instead, we need to coach students to use talk strategically, particularly when the conversation is lively.

During a 3rd grade read-aloud of Eve Bunting’s *Fly Away Home* (HMH, 1993), talk explodes as students begin to realize that the main characters are homeless and living in the airport. Rather than assert control, Katie, the teacher, nudges her students to problem solve:

TEACHER: Hmmm—too many voices. What should we do?

MANY STUDENTS: I think . . . I’m saying . . . That dad, he . . .

TEACHER: Ohhh—I still can’t focus.

MONIQUE: I’ll go first. That dad, he . . .

Monique, a capable, confident student who tends to dominate, is eager to solve the problem by claiming the first turn. Recognizing the need for a more inclusive process, Katie steps back in:

TEACHER: How can we be sure we listen to everyone’s idea?

MARTIN: Monique can go, then Keira, and then me.



To encourage discussion as opposed to round-robin telling, Katie proposes a slightly more responsive variation:

That might work. Let's begin with Monique, focus on her idea, and see where that takes us. Then, let's remember that Keira and Martin have ideas, too, and be sure to come back around to them to see how those fit.

This process encourages students to become active orchestrators of their conversation and helps them understand that they can hold their own thought while engaging with other students' ideas.

### *No One's Listening*

Too often, we use the ability to retell as the gauge for listening. Protocols like "tell what your partner said" set the listening bar low. It's possible to comply without any intent to draw from your partner's thinking—indeed, without actually understanding his or her thinking at all.

If we want students to consider a wide range of perspectives, to linger with an idea to grow it to its fullest potential, and to negotiate meaning in their discussions, we must give them experience with the constructive potential of listening (Nichols, 2006, 2008).

Don, a 4th grade teacher, checks in on Melinda and Anthony, who are talking about Jim Arnosky's *Wolves* (National Geographic Children's Books, 2001). Anthony, reading from his jotting on a sticky note, compares Arnosky's text with Jonathan London's lyrical book *Panther: Shadow of the Swamp* (Candlewick, 2000).

Rather than building on Anthony's thinking, Melinda launches into describing her own thinking:

MELINDA: I wrote on mine that—

TEACHER (*immediately interceding*): Hold on, Melinda, did you really listen to what Anthony said?

MELINDA (*after attempting to rephrase Anthony's comment and realizing she didn't quite catch it*): What did you say?

ANTHONY: That he wrote the same way that the panther book did.

MELINDA: Oh, yeah! It's . . . like a poem. What do you call it?

TEACHER: Why do you think Jim Arnosky wrote the text in a lyrical way?

ANTHONY: (*shrugs*)

MELINDA: It's because he wants us to be calm, like with the panther. So we don't think they're scary.

reflection process, including questions like, "What ideas did you get from others today? What did those ideas do to your thinking?"

Over time, Monique began to recognize that others were growing from her thinking, but she was not always growing from theirs. Her goal became ensuring that she learned from someone else each day. This required a new conversational stance for Monique, and a new repertoire of strategies, including asking questions,

Open the conversation to a range of possibilities and then defer and nudge instead of evaluating.

Don steps back in, offering descriptive feedback.

So, Melinda, you really listened to Anthony's idea, and the two of you stayed focused on it and talked more about it. Now you both understand something about this text and what the author is doing that you didn't understand before.

### *Some Students Dominate*

As talk begins to flow, it's not unusual for more verbal students to begin dominating the conversation. We could control the overabundant output with turn-taking tokens, such as marbles or talking sticks. But control and teaching are not necessarily synonymous.

Third grader Monique, described above, brought incredible insight and energy to every conversation. In fact, it was becoming difficult for some students to wiggle into conversations with her. To help Monique recognize her pattern of participation, her teacher initiated a daily classwide

noticing the quiet students and inviting them into the conversation, and listening for ideas that might shift her thinking.

Late in the year, Monique was speaking about the realization that some students had not joined the conversation that day. When asked why that might have happened, Monique offered,

I think it's maybe because we're still not sure to ask the shy people. We get busy talking and forget. They may think we don't care how they think.

Although Monique's pattern of participation did not shift completely, her reflections and efforts provided evidence of a more thoughtful approach to conversation. This, combined with teacher facilitation, calmed her presence in a discussion, allowing more inclusiveness. And it taught self-monitoring abilities that will serve Monique well in the future.

### Some Students Remain Silent

When some students don't talk, considering our process for facilitation is one place to begin. Are we giving students time to work through complex ideas with a partner prior to larger-group talk? Knowing that silence on the outside does not equal silence on the inside, are we watching for evidence of engagement on students' faces or in their body language, and then responding? Conversational invitations like, "That look on your face has me thinking something surprised you. What was it?" may offer students a foothold for stepping into the conversation.

We also need to accept the tentativeness with language that comes as students wrestle with new ideas and give them the time they need to progress from exploratory talk to more presentational talk (Barnes, 1992). This progression is evident in the following example of a group of 3rd graders whose thinking and talking have evolved through three read-alouds of *An Angel for Solomon Singer* by Cynthia Rylant (Scholastic, 1996):

KIARRA: Sometimes, when people leave their home, they miss their home and wish for what they're used to. [Solomon Singer] is used to Indiana. But now he doesn't really have a home, and that's sad.

KEYSHA: When you're at home, you have friends, and you have confidence. Everything's what you're used to.

RAMIKA: But at the men's hotel, there's probably no one there that likes him, nobody that takes care of him. That's why he's going to the West Way Café.

EDWARD: Now, he has friends and confidence. People need it to feel at home.

The depth of student understanding and the flow of talk from student to student here are notable. A few days earlier, the group's language had been hesitant; now, it reflects clarity

and confidence. Expecting coherent thought and polished language too soon would have stifled the process that brought students to this point.

### The "Right Answer" Paradigm Prevails

At times, discussion problems have more to do with us than with our students. Our verbal and nonverbal responses to our students' ideas can either expand talk or shut it down.

Several things are happening here, most of which maintain the teacher as the authority and reduce the need for discourse. The teacher responds to each student voice rather than encouraging students to respond to one another. She confirms the motive suggested by Marla, and she confirms and clarifies Kevin's thinking, eliminating any need for the other students to engage with him. Her multiple "yeses"

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Despite our best efforts, teaching behaviors sometimes perpetuate the traditional initiate-respond-evaluate pattern of classroom talk (Mehan, 1979). This positions the teacher as the authority and focuses effort on answers instead of ideas. Consider this discussion during a read-aloud of Eve Bunting's *The Memory String* (Clarion, 2000). The 2nd grade teacher is working with students to make sense of the character Laura's behavior as she sits with her cat telling the story of each button she has laced on a string.

TEACHER: Why does Laura talk about each button?

MARLA: To remember?

TEACHER: Yes, to remember. Why?

KEVIN: Cuz those people are gone, and she can't—they died, and then she remembers them because she counts them and it makes her to remember.

TEACHER: Yes, the buttons remind her of the people she's lost. Can anyone tell me how this make her feel?

MULTIPLE VOICES: Sad.

TEACHER: Yes, but just sad?

elevate answers over ideas, with the "can anyone tell me" phrase indicating that the process is evaluative. If students have different perspectives, the quick firing off of the next question has eliminated any space to explore them.

As an alternative, we can use questions that open the conversation to a range of possibilities and then defer and nudge instead of evaluating. Questions like, "What do the rest of you think about this?" "Are there other possibilities?" "Does this make sense?" or "How does this idea connect to our earlier thinking?" encourage students to work with one another's ideas and to begin to move the conversation forward on their own.

### Learning About and Through Talk

To engage students in real talk, we must be thoughtful and responsive, trust in students' abilities, and support them in problem solving instead of controlling the process ourselves.

Dominic, Luis, and Ana were

engaged daily in read-alouds with rich, complex texts ripe with ambiguity and open to multiple interpretations. Their teacher facilitated their conversations with open-ended questions designed to extend talk, provided descriptive feedback to make their developing skills visible, and structured the day with ample time and space for students to engage on their own. Far from being stymied by *Christmas in the Trenches*, these students dove in strategically.

Ana, who did not utter a word in our opening excerpt, later offered a pivotal insight. With her finger tracing the words on the last page, she pointed out, “The author said *wondering*. See?”

Back to the trenches. Back to the waiting. Wondering what had just happened to us, and wondering what the next move should be.

Protocols like “tell what your partner said” set the listening bar low.

Then, drawing from the inner conversation that had obviously been raging in her head, Ana posed, “They don’t want the war now. They’re wondering! They know it’s messed up too.”

Because real talk is part of the daily fabric of their classroom life, with real teaching aimed at enabling Dominic, Luis, and Ana to harness its potential, the group is developing collaborative

abilities that will prepare them to engage with a complex world. **■**

#### References

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