



A Simple Way to Improve Student Talk By Michael Linsin

Are you having trouble getting your students engaged in quality discussions?

You're not alone.

We frequently hear from teachers who struggle in this area.

Given the growing emphasis on student talk, this is no small problem.

Your students' ability to communicate has suddenly become a reflection of your teaching.

This realization has made teachers more aggressive in trying to get everyone on board.

It's made them more determined and insistent. It's made them eager to push and prod and coax their students into [meaningful conversations](#).

But when students feel pressure, they clam up. It freezes their brain rather than frees their brain.

And make no mistake, freeing is what they need most.

To be creative and expressive, they need to feel at ease. They need to forget about themselves and their performance and get lost in the moment.

Natural, spontaneous conversations can never be manufactured. They can't be forced, dictated, or even strongly encouraged. The more pressure you put on your students the less engaged they'll be.

So what's the solution?

Well, the first step is to stop cajoling, urging, and the like. Stop telling them to talk more or to talk louder. Stop turning what should be an enjoyable experience into a formal presentation to be graded and judged.

Take off the shackles and the conversation will flow.

Still, there is a strategy you can use to speed up the process. It's a strategy that will alleviate the pressure to perform, loosen them up, and give them a chance to practice---all in one fell swoop.

It takes all of five minutes and can improve student talk by leaps and bounds. The way it works is just before beginning your lesson, group or pair your students together and ask them to stand.

Standing gets the blood going, shakes the cobwebs free, and prepares them for action. Next, write a fun discussion prompt on your whiteboard or sheet of chart paper.

Share a time when you were afraid.

Describe your favorite place in the world.

If you could be a superhero, who would you be and why?

Then turn them loose. Let them chatter away while under no pressure to perform. Let them practice sharing and listening without it feeling formal or academic.

Let them talk for the fun of it.

By the second or third round, the conversation will begin to reflect what you've been working so hard to achieve. Your students will be animated and energetic. They'll smile and look each other in the eye.

They'll be *engaged*.

And it isn't the topic that's causing it. It's the freedom. It's the pleasure of creative expression and the bonding of true give-and-take discussion.

You see, [it's supposed to be enjoyable](#). It's why we meet friends for coffee or talk on the phone for an hour and a half.

When it's not, when it becomes stiff and artificial, it sucks the life right out of the room. It makes students want to cover their face or stare blankly at the clock on the wall.

Once you're satisfied with how they're interacting, send them back to their seats and begin your lesson.

Now when it comes time for discussion, you won't believe the difference.

Like having a whole new class.