

They Just Talk Too Much

How to Get Focused Academic Talk

In my first year of teaching, back in the early 1990s, I remember having a conversation with several of my veteran colleagues about the chatty, talkative nature of our current group of students. “They’re not a bad group of kids, they just won’t stop talking,” was the consensus of the group. A few of my colleagues also commented that the behavior seemed to be getting worse every year. At the time, although I was also frustrated with excessive student talking, I thought to myself, *“Then why do you sound so surprised? Give me some ideas on how to help focus their energy.”*

Over the years, I’ve come to both appreciate and be annoyed by student talking. Indeed, excessive student talking at inappropriate times can make our jobs very difficult. However, I know that talking is not the enemy and talking is not a mental deficiency. The real issue isn’t that students talk too much; it’s that they often talk at the wrong times, about the wrong topics, or with the wrong tone.

I’ve learned that having a focused, intelligent, and meaningful academic conversation is a learned skill. And just like other skills my students need to learn, it needs to be overtly taught, modeled, practiced, and debriefed in order to be mastered. In order to help focus student talk towards academic topics, consider the following steps.

First, personally **Reflect** on the topic of student talking. Consider your own tolerance level as well as the needs of your students. If you value student passivity and a quiet classroom above all else, you may need to reconsider the nature of learning. True learning is often messy, noisy, and almost always involves interaction with other people. We certainly need to direct student attention, energy, and talk but not everything in the classroom can be perfectly managed or controlled.

The second step is to **Plan** for positive and focused academic talk by your students. As teachers, we often put in a lot of time and effort in creating lessons that align to standards, include relevant assessments, and active learning strategies. However, we often forget that

our students need to be overtly taught how to talk in an academic way. This goes beyond merely emphasizing procedures for behavior and includes modeling, the specific roles and tasks to complete, and how to listen to and question each other.

Finally, remember to **Debrief and Give Feedback** to students about their status and growth. Students need specific feedback about their progress towards mastering this skill as much as they need feedback about content mastery. If the issue of excessive student talking is preventing learning, devote your energy towards increasing dialogue and feedback instead of focusing solely on consequences and punishment for off-task behavior.

It also helps to keep the proper perspective about student talking. If you think off-task talking is just a student problem, pay close attention at your next faculty meeting.

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