

In this context we refer to discourse as a strategy students use to practice organizing their thoughts in preparation for conversations and/or writing about their thinking. Based upon research done by Marzano, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Marilyn Burns discourse – whether done in verbal or written form - offers students time to process the content and organize their thinking about it. Marzano’s research suggests that new information should be presented in small, digestible chunks, with plenty of opportunity to stop to comprehend and process the new learning. Infusing discourse as an instructional strategy offers this processing time. Students are given a specific topic to ponder and make sense of. They are then asked to organize their thoughts so they can be shared with others.

So, let’s talk for a moment about how discourse might look and sound in a classroom...

Prior to implementing the strategy of discourse, the teacher needs to consider the room environment. The atmosphere must be conducive for conversations. This means that some physical rearranging or grouping of furniture - and students - may need to occur.

As with the introduction of any new strategy, students will benefit from having the new behavior modeled for them. The teacher models and describes the desired behaviors to support this strategy. Considering the Gradual Release of Responsibility, the teacher then provides students with guided practice of the strategy. In other words, the teacher first models... and then provides students guided practice stopping on-demand, thinking about a particular topic, organizing one’s thinking about a given topic, having a meaningful conversation with a partner, ‘coming back into one conversation’ upon a predetermined signal, and recording one’s thinking.

When students understand the expectations, the teacher engages students in verbal and/or written discourse at appropriate times in the lesson.

Implementation of the discourse strategy may sound something like this:

*“8th graders, in this article, we are learning about the challenges many immigrants endured as they traveled to the United States. Using the information just read, what would be an accurate description of the immigrants’ travel to and arrival at Ellis Island? What are some words to describe the immigrants’ feelings at this point in the reading? What words in the text helped you make that inference? Turn to your partner and share your thoughts and text based evidence for your thinking.”*

Working in pairs or small groups students would engage in conversation about this topic. The teacher would monitor the conversations.

After a few moments, the teacher would use a predetermined signal to capture all students' attention – possibly counting back from 5 and then asking students to return to one conversation.

At that time, the teacher would continue engaging students in this deep thinking by:

- Providing a few students an opportunity to share their thinking.
- Having students write a few sentences to summarize their partner's conversations.
- Asking students to record a few concise notes to document their thinking.

In summary, discourse is an effective strategy to assist students in being successful at expressing their thinking in an understandable manner. The discourse strategy:

- Promotes student engagement, which in turn maximizes the probability for deep learning to occur,
- Permits all students to have access to the learning,
- Allows students the chance to construct meaning,
- Encourages higher-order thinking by providing opportunities for students to extend and deepen critical thinking skills,
- Creates a community of learners,
- Ensures high expectations - and accountability - for the learning of the content and engagement levels,
- Fosters the ability to write on demand, and
- Provides the teacher with ongoing formative assessment, which will help in focusing future instruction.