

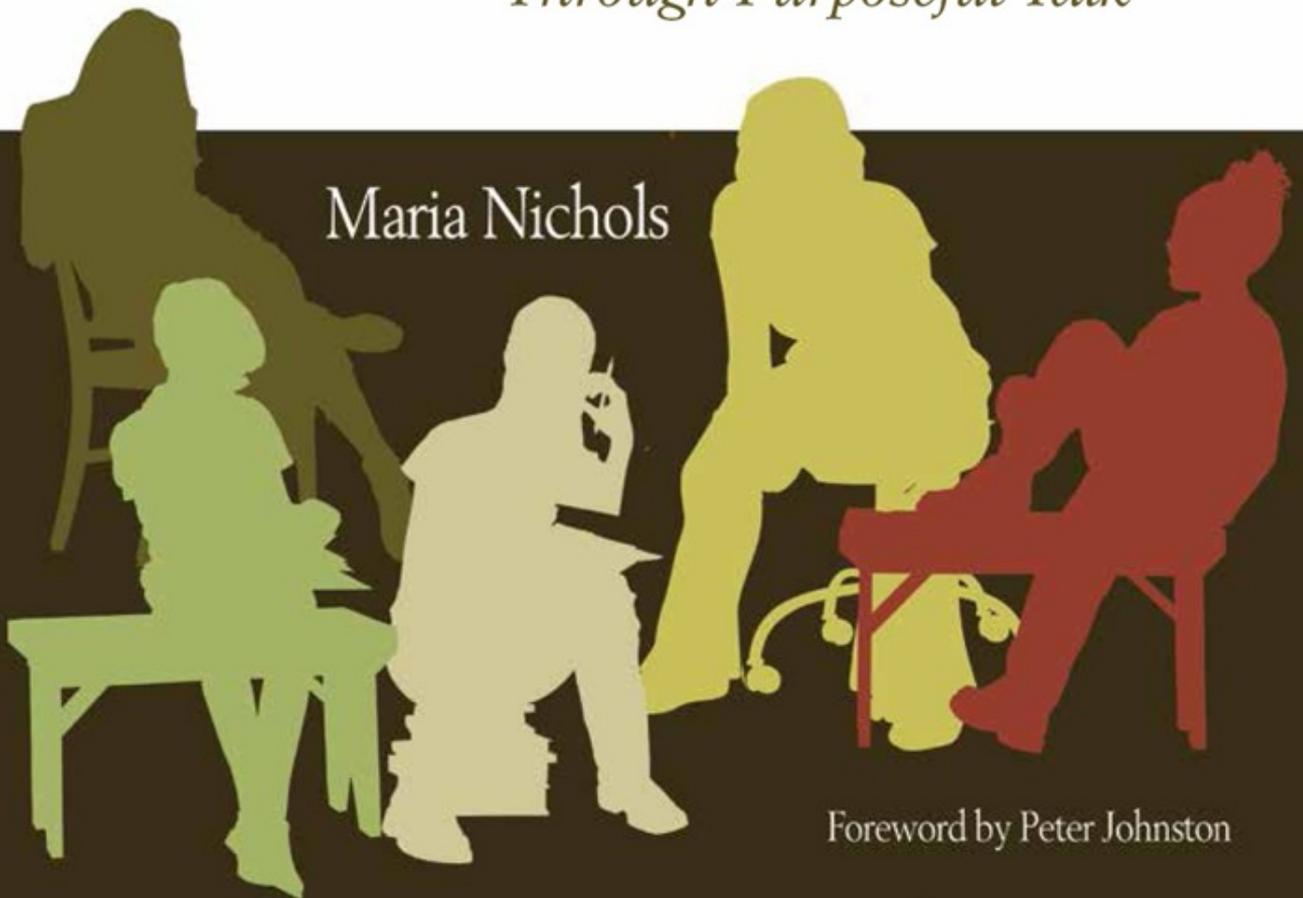


# *Talking* About **Text**

*Guiding Students to  
Increase Comprehension  
Through Purposeful Talk*

Maria Nichols

Foreword by Peter Johnston



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# Foreword

After a decade of increasingly intense emphasis on phonics instruction, even the researchers responsible for that turn have come to realize that it has not produced a generation of students who understand and enjoy reading, so they have turned their attention to comprehension instruction, complaining that not enough is known about “reading comprehension and thinking skills or how to address motivational...issues” (Otaiba and Torgeson 2007). Fortunately, they are wrong. It is true that not enough attention has been paid to comprehension and that research on comprehension instruction has focused rather narrowly on cognitive strategies. The greater problem, however, has been that there are few books that present a theoretically coherent yet thoroughly practical approach to comprehension instruction and thinking about text. This is where Maria Nichols’s work makes a huge contribution.

Nichols’s first book, *Comprehension through Conversation* (2006), was a breakthrough. It offered a practical approach to teaching comprehension that moved us beyond a simple cognitive view and it capitalized on Vygotsky’s (1978) understanding that social interactions act as scaffolds for development. It showed us how in classrooms we are nurturing not only students’ thinking but also their literate minds. The transcripts of interactions among students in that book are particularly powerful. They show young students thinking together in ways rarely seen among high school students. They show students who have learned to teach themselves and one another by understanding how to talk together about books. Through other transcripts, she shows exactly how teachers have taught the students to do that.

This new book, *Talking About Text: Guiding Students to Increase Comprehension Through Purposeful Talk*, takes Nichols’s groundbreaking work a step further, but more importantly, it capitalizes on her extensive experience as a literacy coach and shows step by step how to do it. She is equally clear about the how-to and the why-to, and just as in a good writing conference, she leaves us with a strong vision of what is possible for our students. She shows how, through dialogue, children come to not only comprehend better but also want to and expect to do better, as well as to enjoy the challenge of stretching themselves. She offers concise, explicit, step-by-step ways to become a master teacher of comprehension.

Although Nichols shows us how the Gradual Release of Responsibility model works in teaching comprehension, she also shows us a much less common and perhaps more important aspect of the model. There is an inherent hierarchy in the gradual release model, with the teacher holding the more powerful position. Because this relationship is part of what students learn, it is important that they also experience comprehension interactions in a more equitable way. In these situations, students learn to take control of extending their own understanding in their interactions with each other. In Nichols’s classrooms, they acquire this autonomy in an engaging way and as a tool they know how to use. Students learn how to use one another to expand their own development and, in the process, learn that reading is engaging.

In the process of teaching us how to expand students’ comprehension, Nichols takes us

beyond comprehension to the real purpose of teaching. She shows us how teaching for comprehension simultaneously teaches for civil society: students learn to interact productively and to understand themselves and one another in new ways—ways that will lead to a peaceable classroom, and perhaps a more democratic society.

Peter H. Johnston  
author of *Choice Words*

# Acknowledgments

Andrew Carnegie once described teamwork as the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results. Thanks to colleagues who immerse themselves in their work, with curious minds and a belief that together we are capable of understanding and succeeding far better than alone, this fuel is plentiful.

My thank yous must begin with the teachers at Webster Elementary, Garfield Elementary, and numerous teachers throughout the San Diego Unified School District. Not only does their work with purposeful talk dance throughout this book, but we are privileged to peek into several of their classrooms in the pages to come.

The dynamic trio of Susie Althoff, Amy Vagdama, and Tess Suzanna—the kindergarten team at Webster Elementary—has helped me refine my understanding of students' first steps with purposeful talk. Third-grade teacher Jeralyn Treas's intuitive problem solving of difficulties with talk behavior has helped countless others support their own students through similar wobbles. I thank them for allowing me to question, hypothesize, observe, teach, and, most importantly, wonder and be amazed alongside them.

Special thanks go to Peter Johnston, Debra Crouch, Jeralyn Treas, and Chas Moriarty, who listened, read, questioned, offered feedback, listened, and read again. Their inquisitive spirit helped me define my purpose with this endeavor and maintain a clarity of message.

I'm grateful to Lori Kamola, editorial director for Shell Education, who read *Comprehension Through Conversation: The Power of Purposeful Talk in the Reading Workshop* (Nichols 2006) with the keen, practical mind of a classroom teacher. Lori looked for the beginning—the lesson design that enables first steps with purposeful talk—and smartly suggested creating it.

And lastly, I owe endless thank yous to Rick, who understands that this work is never done.

## Introduction

“I just don’t know,” Katie sighed. “We’ve been working on talk behavior for over 10 weeks now, and I still have to remind the kids to speak to each other and not to me, and they still aren’t really listening to each other—at least, not all of them. Maybe I’m doing something wrong?”

I’ve honestly lost count of how often I’ve heard variations of those same words, with the same long sigh attached each time. Teaching students to use talk purposefully in an academic setting takes time. We are teaching students to interact in extremely focused ways in an environment where many have become quite passive. We are also asking them to use this behavior in conjunction with newly learned cognitive processes, or ways of thinking, in order to better understand complex texts, ideas, and issues. This is an awe-inspiring range of considerations for students—or anyone, for that matter—to orchestrate at one time.

“Tell me about the progress your students *have* made,” I encouraged, knowing full well that Katie Crommer, the classroom teacher, had much to celebrate.

“Well,” Katie hesitated, eyes upward, clearly envisioning her third graders in her head. “They don’t get frustrated anymore when I won’t confirm whether their thoughts are right or not. They understand that they need evidence for their thinking, and they’re getting that they need to talk about their ideas with each other to figure out if the thinking is on track. So their meaning making has become stronger. And some students are actually responding to what others have said when they talk, but they still look at me instead of at each other when they talk. And then there are the kids who still just sit there....”

As I listened to Katie, I knew that this was amazing progress in just 10 weeks—not only for the students, but for Katie, too. Just four months ago, when Katie and I first began working together, she was struggling with shifts in her beliefs about students’ capacity for understanding, the use of talk as a tool for constructing meaning, the importance of building habits of mind, and her role in the process. Katie’s evolving beliefs required her to make huge shifts in her instructional practices, such as changing her purpose and technique for questioning. Now, she encourages the exploration of ideas as opposed to quizzing for right answers, and she orchestrates talk as opposed to confirming those answers.

Like anyone who is relearning a behavior, from perfecting a golf swing to improving snacking habits, Katie experiences temporary lapses into her old practice. But not to worry—her students are developing abilities alongside her, and both she and the students are working to strengthen these abilities in surprisingly supportive ways. Just the day before, during a read-aloud, I had watched Katie excitedly yell, “Right!” after a student shared his thinking about a big idea in a text. Then, with her hand waving madly in the air as if to erase the word (and an “I know!” look shot in my direction), she regrouped and was about

to ask, “What makes you think that?” But Justin beat her to the punch!

“Why do you think it’s right?” he asked with a look that indicated he disagreed, but was willing to listen.

Katie smartly smiled, explained her thinking, cited evidence, and asked Justin, “What do you think?”

And isn’t that just what we want? We want the students to actively seek our explanations and evidence, as well as recognize that there may be alternative possibilities as meaning is constructed. In this instance, Justin was actually taking over the role of orchestrating the talk!

Katie’s developing awareness of the power of students’ purposeful talk has strengthened her ability to encourage talk, keep the talk growing, and orchestrate the talk. She simply needed to take a moment to reflect as a means of gauging clear steps for herself and the students, as opposed to being overwhelmed by the whole of the journey still ahead.

Likewise, Katie’s students, as Justin so clearly illustrated, have come a very long way from the disengaged group I first observed. Many are metamorphosing into vibrant thinkers who understand that they have an active role to play in their own learning. The students are realizing the value of talk as a tool for constructing meaning, and with this realization, they are understanding the importance of considering others’ thinking, listening with intent, and ultimately discovering an overall sense of power and enthusiasm for the learning process.

Is Katie doing something wrong? Absolutely not! The difficulties Katie is encountering are predictable and solvable over time. Patience—with herself and the students—mixed with high expectations—again for herself and the students—are key. In addition, the march toward success with purposeful talk requires that thoughtful lesson design be partnered with this mix of patience and high expectations—lessons that introduce and support new ways of thinking and talking together, and lessons that gradually release responsibility for the thinking and talking to the learner for the purpose of creating independent ability and habits of mind.

When I share Katie’s story, the questions I am asked so often are “But how?” “How did she develop her understanding of talk?” “How did she get started?” “How did she introduce this work to her students?” “How are those lessons designed?” And the list of “how” questions keeps going and going.

This book is an attempt to answer many of these “how” questions and a few of the “what” and “why” questions that often weave their way throughout conversations about purposeful talk. As with most complex undertakings, there is no one correct, magical way to go about teaching and encouraging students to use talk as a constructivist tool. The suggestions and possible lessons you will encounter in these pages are just that—suggestions and possibilities. They are based on my experiences in my own classroom and on side-by-side coaching opportunities with remarkably dedicated teachers at a range of grade levels in schools serving varying populations of students.

## **Purposeful Talk: What Is It, and Why Do I Need It in My**

# Classroom?

Two of the most common “what” and “why” questions about purposeful talk are naturally linked together into what essentially boils down to “What is purposeful talk, and why do I need it in my classroom?”

The ability of humans to think and talk together, and the end result when we do so smartly, is a focus in many arenas of our world today, with voices from the business, political, and academic sectors seeming to lead the charge. While there are differing labels for differing forms of and purposes for thinking and talking together, ways of talking that result in the co-construction of new understandings and ideas seem to take center stage.

Ralph Peterson (1992) and David Bohm (1996) make distinctions between conversation, discussion, and dialogue, pointing to dialogue as a unique way of thinking and talking together. Dialogue, Peterson asserts, is a combining of ideas that requires thoughtful listening and responding, allowing participants to collaborate and the construction of meaning to become the primary focus. David Bohm further defines dialogue as a true negotiation of meaning. In *Comprehension Through Conversation: The Power of Purposeful Talk in the Reading Workshop*, I summarize the result of successful dialogue in this way: “Through this constructive process, participants achieve a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts—ideas that are bigger and better than any individual may have conceived on their own” (Nichols 2006, 7). Because dialogue, as defined by Peterson and Bohm, is so incredibly purpose driven, I refer to this form of oral discourse as purposeful talk. Purposeful talk is focused, collaborative talk; it is a social process that requires students to actively engage with ideas, think out loud together, and work to a co-construction of those ideas. But why bring purposeful talk into the classroom? In *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*, author Courtney Cazden asserts that “the basic purpose of school is achieved through communication” (2001, 2). As Cazden points out, teachers are in charge of controlling this communication, or talk, in positive ways with the goal of enhancing learning. Research by Wolf, Crosson, and Resnick found that “effective classroom talk was linked to a high level of student’s thinking and active use of knowledge” (2004). In fact, according to Simich-Dudgeon “In the last 25 years or so, research has provided significant evidence that collaborative academic talk is at the heart of the learning experience” (1998).

The Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA), a research group affiliated with the Albany Institute for Research in Education (AIRE) in the School of Education at the University at Albany, has focused on practices that ensure that all students have the opportunity to develop the language and literacy skills necessary for success in academic settings and beyond. A report based on CELA’s research on classroom discourse concludes that “learning is most effective when classrooms emphasize knowledge derived from active participation in meaningful conversations within important fields of study” (2006).

Lucy Calkins adds to this emphasis on using talk to construct understanding, concluding that “talk, like reading and writing, is a major motor—I could even say *the* major motor—of intellectual development” (2001, 226). This sentiment is echoed in the work of Lauren Resnick and the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. In defining what she refers to as “accountable talk,” Resnick argues that “talking with others

about ideas and work is fundamental to learning” (1999). It seems that strong, purposeful talk is clearly linked to the depth of understanding students are able to achieve.

But this focused, purpose-driven talk does not happen by itself. In *Comprehension Through Conversation: The Power of Purposeful Talk in the Reading Workshop*, I noted that many of our students come to us knowing how to chitchat, share ideas in casual situations, tell about things, and give us reports. “But the heightened level of engagement necessary for purposeful talk may be something new to them” (Nichols 2006, 29).

Focusing on our students’ abilities to use talk most often leads to the realization that all of our students need some level of support in developing and using talk purposefully. As Resnick proposes, “Teachers should intentionally create the norms and skills of accountable talk in their classrooms” (1999). And in their research of exemplary fourth-grade teachers, Richard Allington and Peter Johnston found that “not only was it [talk] modeled by the teacher in her interactions with students, but it was also deliberately taught, nurtured, and expected” (2001, 205).

Teaching students to talk purposefully necessitates the creation of emotionally and physically robust environments that encourage collaborative efforts, as well as the design of curriculum that focuses on cognitive processes that support the development of big ideas. It also requires daily lessons that focus on the combination of these cognitive processes and building purposeful talk behaviors. Yet the reality is that very little time is spent teaching students to construct meaning using talk. Lucy Calkins observes, “In schools, talk is sometimes valued and sometimes avoided, but—and this is surprising—talk is rarely taught. It is rare to hear teachers discuss their efforts to teach students to talk well” (2001, 226).

## **The Changing Role of the Teacher**

The use of purposeful talk as a constructivist tool requires us to rethink our role in our students’ learning. Constructivism values developmentally appropriate learning that is initiated and directed by the students and facilitated by the teacher. Undoubtedly, teaching was easier when having academic conversations meant asking questions that had a right answer—especially when we knew what that right answer was. Once the question was asked, the teacher simply became the judge: No... No... Not quite... You’re on the right track... Yes! That’s what I was looking for!

When purposeful talk is used to explore ideas, as opposed to give right answers, the teacher’s role takes on new demands. The first steps begin prior to the lesson, with a mix of decisions about levels of support, thoughtful selection of texts, and backward lesson design.

During the lesson, our role becomes one of orchestration. We need to cue students to use the talk behavior they are learning to support the construction of meaning, as well as provide added support at key points in the conversation, such as clarifying, bundling ideas together, and reminding students to use specific comprehension strategies. To be successful, we must be listening closely, interpreting students’ thoughts, and tracking the meaning as it builds. We speak so often about the importance of the students’ level of engagement in the learning; however, when orchestrating purposeful talk, the level of the

teacher's engagement matters every bit as much! As Cazden points out, "Being able to *hear* students' ideas, to understand the sense they are making, is not as easy as it may sound" (2001, 89).

After the lesson, our role is to support the students' growing abilities with thinking and talking purposefully about their thinking by debriefing and offering feedback. This enables all students to develop an understanding of the strategies and process involved in the construction of meaning and encourages them toward building habits of mind. While all this may seem daunting at first, it grows easier over time, even to the point of becoming second nature.

## **Defining Goals**

Ultimately there are three interconnected and equally important goals for teaching purposeful talk. First we hope to build not just the ability, but also a true desire to think collaboratively with others about complex ideas and issues. This desire is derived from a history of conversations in which students were made explicitly aware of the power of thinking and talking together purposefully. While we don't always have a partner ready to discuss our thinking as we read, we hope students develop the habit of deliberately seeking out others to discuss the ideas and issues in their reading and in their world, knowing that their ideas and understandings are always strengthened by doing so. Equally as important for our students is the building of habits of mind for engaged, independent thinking, both in school and beyond. When students talk with others about their reading and thinking, they become accustomed to having their thinking questioned, having to support their thoughts with evidence, and feeling their own ideas shift and grow. Gradually students develop the understanding that there will be interpretations and points of view that differ from their own. Over time, the echoes of months and years of conversations should resound in students' minds, creating habits that guide even solo efforts. Students begin to question their own interpretations of their reading, anticipate alternative views, weigh evidence, and develop their own ideas thoughtfully so that their thinking is strong even before they engage with others. Calkins reminds us, "The great Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky helped us realize that by giving our students practice in talking with others, we give them frames for thinking on their own" (2001, 26). John Bruer sums this up succinctly, "Discourse doesn't make thought visible, rather, thought is internalized discourse" (as cited by Cazden 2001, 75).

And with thoughtful lesson design that moves students' thinking and talking beyond the text, we hope students will develop the habit of using their constructed understandings of texts and ideas to better understand and engage with their world, questioning, hypothesizing, and acting upon it in positive ways. In this way, purposeful talk becomes a tool for understanding and successfully navigating the possibilities and challenges of the twenty-first century.

## **Navigating This Book**

The ideas and possible lessons you will find in these pages will help you take the first steps with purposeful talk and work toward developing your students' independence with thinking and talking about ideas.

In [Chapter 1: Introduction](#), we focus on the major “what” and “why” questions surrounding purposeful talk. Purposeful talk is defined, and a rationale for teaching purposeful talk is discussed. Now we need to get busy!

As we move on to [Chapter 2: Getting the Talk Started: Lessons That Teach Purposeful Talk Behavior](#), we will continue addressing “what” questions about purposeful talk by taking a more detailed look at the body of behaviors that enable students to use talk constructively. Then we begin answering the “how” questions by considering highly supported lessons that teach beginning talk behavior. To bring the lessons to life, they are embedded in actual classrooms at a variety of grade levels and at various stages of the progression of purposeful talk. The lessons are designed to focus on both the cognitive processes students need in order to build their comprehension abilities and the talk behavior that helps them deepen their thinking. The supporting information will also help you consider what adjustments to the lessons may be necessary to suit your students’ unique needs.

From there, [Chapter 3: Creating Habits of Mind: Lessons That Teach Students to Read, Think, and Talk Independently](#) will continue our in-depth consideration of “how” questions. This section focuses on lesson design that builds independence with specific ways of thinking about nonfiction reading using the gradual release of responsibility model. We will track the work from [Chapter 1](#) in one of our classrooms as a variety of instructional approaches and supports are used to release responsibility to the students for thinking and talking together.

[Chapter 4: Maintaining the Momentum with Purposeful Talk](#) will offer suggestions for working through difficulties with purposeful talk. As Katie has discovered, developing the ability to talk purposefully in an academic setting is challenging for the teacher and students alike. This section is intended to not only serve as a wealth of suggestions for bumps in the road, but also to create comfort in the realization that difficulties with talk are predictable and solvable. It also reminds us that strong purposeful talk requires constant vigilance.

And lastly, [Chapter 5: What Can Be](#) will leave us with a vision of possibility—a glimpse of students developing an awareness of the power of purposeful talk, of the depth of understanding they are capable of constructing when they think and talk together, and of their abilities to draw on these understandings in order to re-create their world.

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