



EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING

Written Conversation Protocol

We all know that kids love to write notes to each other in school, but those notes rarely have anything to do with what we are trying to teach. The Written Conversation strategy harnesses the universal urge to share, but brings it into the curriculum. After reading (or hearing a lecture, watching a video, or doing an experiment), pairs of students write short notes back and forth to each other about the experience. Think of Written Conversation as legalized note-passing in your content area.

Why use it?

We often use “class discussion” as a key after-reading activity. But when you think about it, what is a class discussion? It is usually one person talking and 29 others sitting, pretending to listen, and hoping that their turn never comes. This is not exactly what standards documents call “engaged learning.” With Written Conversation, you can have a “discussion” where everyone is actively talking at once—though silently, and in writing.

How does it work?

1. After the reading is completed, have students identify partners for a written conversation. If necessary the teacher pairs students.
2. Explain the activity first, if this protocol is new to them, so kids understand that they will be writing simultaneous notes to one another about the reading selection, swapping them every 2-3 minutes at the teachers’ command, for a total of 3 exchanges (or 2 or 4, depending on your time constraints), and keeping quiet along the way. They are to write for the whole time allotted for each note, put down words, phrases, questions, connections, ideas, wonderings—anything related to the passage, or responding to what their partner has said, just as they would in an out-loud conversation. Spelling and grammar do not count—after all these are just notes.
3. The teacher can leave the topic open: “What struck you about this reading?” Or, give an appropriate open-ended prompt: “What do you understand and not understand in this selection?” “What are the most important ideas here?” “Do you agree or disagree with the author, and why?”
4. Both students in each pair start writing a note (e.g., “Dear Bobby, When I read this chapter I was amazed that Abraham Lincoln actually said...”). Meanwhile, the teacher watches the time, and after 2-3 minutes, asks student to exchange notes. The teacher reminds: “Read what your partner said, then take 2 minutes to answer just as if you were talking out loud. You can write responses, feelings, stories, make connections of your own, or ask your partner questions—anything you would do in a face-to-face conversation.”

5. After the planned 2-3 note exchange is complete, the payoff comes when you say: “O.K., now you can talk out loud with your partner for a couple of minutes.” You should notice a rising buzz in the room, showing that kids have plenty to talk about.
6. Next, a short whole-class discussion can be much more engaged and productive, because everyone will have fresh ideas about the topic. Ask a few pairs to share one highlight or thread of their written conversations as a way of starting the discussion.
7. Some predictable problems occur. The first time you try this, the kids will tend to shift into oral conversation when papers are passed (Adults also do this—it’s a normal human response when you are bonding with a partner). Be ready to remind them to “Keep it in writing” during the transitions. Then, even with the best instructions, some kids will write 2 words and put their pens down, wasting 2 good minutes of writing time with each pass. You have to keep stressing, “We write for the whole time.” If necessary, provide additional prompts to the class or individuals to help them keep going. Finally, after you call kids back to order at the end, when they are talking out loud with their partners, you might find it hard to get them back. This happy little “management problem” shows you that kids are connecting to each other and the material.