Core Academic Conversation Skills

1. Elaborate and clarify.
2. Support ideas with examples.
3. Build on and/or challenge a partner’s idea.
4. Paraphrase.
5. Synthesize conversation points.

A Few Important Things to Consider

1. Each skill is a double skill: prompting a student to 1.) use the skill and 2.) effective respond to another student’s prompt.
2. Each skill requires that students are good listeners. This is also a skill that need to be taught. (See attached Active Listening lesson for ideas about how to do this.)
3. The purpose of these skills is to deepen understanding and provide higher order thinking skills in the content area.
How These Skills May Look in a Classroom

1. Elaborate and Clarify

The students need to learn how to pull out the important information, hold on to it and weed out the not so important information. Once they can do that then the student should be able to make their understanding more clear. We need to help our students use the correct conversation prompts so they can elaborate and clarify:

For example: In Math class, if students were discussing irrational numbers in class and were asked to identify whether they were rational or irrational, we would want the students to elaborate on their answer. We might say something like “I believe that .32641598….. is an irrational number because it is a decimal that continues without terminating or repeating a pattern”. Their partner may ask something along the lines of “Show me an example of a repeating decimal….and what term do we use to describe that number?” The more specific the students’ can be when explaining or elaborating, the more understanding of the concept will be gained. The same is true for other content areas as well. When students are in charge of making their own meaning it can help to solidify their understanding of any topic.

Using analogies can also help students make these connections. Going back to rational and irrational numbers, if students are having a difficult time remembering which is which, you could compare them to laws: Rational numbers follow the law or patterns, irrational numbers do not, they may act a little crazy. Asking students to use the prompt, “It’s like when…” can help them to develop these analogies independently.

Students also need to be trained how to ask the right questions at the right time, just as teachers might do. Prompts have been provided to help do this, but the Keys to Literacy questioning terms and prompts could also be used here. Asking students to use those on the higher end of the continuum will lead to higher order thinking skills.
2. **Support Ideas with Examples**-

   Students need to be able to use examples to back up their idea or answer. Students should be able to find their evidence or backup from four main types of examples:
   
   - Examples from text
   - Examples from other text
   - Examples from the world
   - Examples from one’s own life

   Many of us do not have a textbook to use, however we can have students use their notes to provide support. Students could use the internet as text, as well as anchor charts, short stories or novels, primary documents, even pictures and other images. In cases where texts are available, one strategy to help students locate appropriate examples is a “quotation negotiation”. Several themes, opinions, or main ideas are posted around the room and read aloud to students. Students are then provided with a slip of paper (or multiple slips) with quotations (examples) from the text. They then must pair up with different people, maybe 3 or 5, depending on class size, to converse and justify under which theme, opinion or main idea their slips should go. After placing their slips, their reasoning can be shared as a whole group.

   Any time we can relate a concept to the “real world” will help to better understanding. Of course, students are often eager to make connections to their own life and this can help their understanding as well, but it can be easy for them to lose focus or get off track when providing these types of examples. A student might provide an example with a lot of potential, but that doesn’t quite fit right then. It’s important to still validate these attempts and this can be a useful time for the “Parking Lot”, a designated space for them to “park” these contributions until they can be covered or discussed later.
3. Build on and/or Challenge a Partner’s Idea

Students need to learn how to build on other student ideas or appropriately challenge an idea. Students need to be taught how to express an idea without monopolizing the whole discussion, they need to be able to listen to other points of view and be respectful when doing so. Having the students realize that building on ideas is not competition but rather collaboration, may be a challenge at first, but with direct instruction and the appropriate prompts, students can learn to do this.

One option could be to have students “Zoom In and Pick a Point”. As they listen to the contributions of other students in the class they concentrate on finding one point that maintains the focus of the topic. Students could be asked to write these points down to help them to build on or challenge their classmates ideas. When discussing these ideas our students, especially the younger ones, will need to be taught how to respectfully and productively respond to them. The provided sentence frames and prompts can help with this. Students could take different sides in short pair-share activities and practice how to respond to ideas, or even role play how to respectfully respond to classmates ideas, especially those they may not agree with.

For example, students may be practicing solving quadratic equations using the quadratic formula. The students are given an equation and are asked to work with their partner/small group to decide if the solutions are correct or incorrect. If incorrect they need to figure out where they think the mistake defend their reasoning, as well as listen to their partner’s response. Hopefully the conversation may sound something like this:

Student A “I think the solution is incorrect, the person did not properly use the order of operations inside the square root”/
Student B “I see where you may think that however…I believe the order of operations was followed correctly, they made the mistake when using the factor tree to simplify the square root”.

After the students have discussed their ideas, they need to show they have considered the ideas of the classmates by correcting the equation or by challenging the other provided solutions.
4. **Paraphrase**

The skill of paraphrasing requires students to organize the key points of a speaker or something they’ve read and then show that understanding through their own words. Paraphrasing serves multiple purposes.

1.) Students must synthesize important, and sometimes contradictory points, and be able to restate them in their own words.

2.) Paraphrasing can also help students to remember and stay focused on key points of a conversation, discussion or debate.

3.) When having a discussion with another student, this requires the use of listening skills, as well as the ability to curb the urge to interrupt the speaker. Again, providing direct instruction about Active Listening can be helpful here. If the students are using good listening skills they should be able to paraphrase what was said, as well as ask specific questions about what they may not have understood. By really listening students should be able to hear how voices may change when trying to convey very important information, as well as to notice less of a voice change when less relevant information is provided.

4.) Finally, paraphrasing requires students to be able to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information and decide what information should be including when they paraphrase.

Student conversations may sound like this:

Student A “I’m not sure how you got they answer $2\sqrt{6}$…”

Student B “Let me see if I understand where your difficulty starts…”

(I know these conversations happen ALL the time in our classrooms! 😊)
5. Synthesize Conversation Points

This skill requires students to use their paraphrasing skills and combine information in order to gain complete, well-develop understanding of a topic or concept. In order to synthesize, students must be able to remember, highlight, and fit together key ideas from a conversation or discussion. This also requires students to chunk together paraphrased information in order to develop a complete thought or reach a conclusion. Students must also be able to distinguish between important and unimportant information. This helps them to organize and prioritize information and guides them through the process of creating a concrete summary of abstract concepts.

A good way to practice this skill is to have the students synthesize a lesson that has just been taught, a class discussion that just took place, or a speech or lecture that was listened to. This type of activity could be completed orally or in written form and would work well as a formative assessment at the end of a class period. The students’ synthesis would provide the teacher with a quick way to measure the class’s understanding. Asking the students to process the information in written form after they’ve discussed it would serve as an excellent Exit Ticket and would provide the teacher with a strong gauge of where the following class period should begin.