Rich Talk About Text

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My name's David Pearson. I'm from the University of California at Berkeley and it's a real pleasure to be able to talk with Australian educators about one of my favourite topics: rich talk about text.
I want to make it perfectly clear that I don't assume that the only thing that you have to do in order to promote comprehension is just to hold good discussions about text. And that's why it's important to teach skills and strategies like 'reciprocal teaching' or 'transactional strategies instruction' or 'questioning the author'. Those are all important parts of a comprehension curriculum.

I'm also assuming, in doing this presentation today, that you and your colleagues at your school or in your school authority have taken a position on the sorts of assessments you're going to use to assess students' growth in reading, particularly reading comprehension. Being satisfied with good decoding and word recognition is not enough. Being satisfied with good fluency where kids can read as though it sounds like talk, is not enough. It's comprehension, understanding, enjoyment and insight for every child — those are the real goals we have for our reading instruction. Hence the role of rich talk about text, which is my focus in today's presentation.

I'm assuming that what we want is an environment that's rich in high quality talk about text; but it's not just the teacher talking to the students, it's also students talking to one another. And, indeed, the goal of a good comprehension curriculum when it comes to talk, is to promote what we might call 'a conversational tone', where kids are building off of one another's comments and the like. Now, there are many levels of the conversation. We can talk about clarifying and connecting aspects of the text space that's sort of, you know, getting the literal comprehension right. We could talk about what some psychologists call the 'situation model', which involves relating one idea to another, interpreting the text as you see it, relating what's in the text at hand to other texts that kids have read and the like. And there's also critique and evaluation: getting at the issue of why authors have said things the way they have and what their intentions might have been in terms of influencing an audience about what positions or what themes they wanted the readers to take away from the reading at hand.

To put that into an Australian context, you want questions and activities that allow students to play the different roles in Freebody and Luke's 'Four Literacy Resources', or sometimes called 'Four Roles' model. When you're dealing with the text at hand, you might say that the reader is a 'decoder'. When you're dealing with interpretation and establishing relationships amongst the ideas in a text and relating those ideas to things you already know about, that's the 'meaning-maker'. And, when you're getting readers to understand the uses to which a text is put, or you're trying to get readers to evaluate the moves that the author has made, then you're in the 'user' or 'critic' role, within the 'Four Literacy Resources' or 'Four Roles' model.

A lot of my comments today will be based upon a recent meta-analysis done by colleagues of mine in the United States. It's a very elaborate meta-analysis where they looked at literally hundreds of discussions or hundreds of studies of discussion – classroom discussion – and from that they sort of deduced a set of principles and practices that are effective at promoting both talk about text and

comprehension of text. We have pretty good models and research on this score. Three (called: 'instructional conversations', 'questioning the author' and 'junior great books') are what we might call 'dealing with the text' approach. Three others: 'book club', 'literature circle' and 'grand conversations', really are more literary in character and really emphasise how children respond to literature when they read it. And finally, there are three others: 'collaborative reasoning, 'the Paidea seminar' and 'philosophy for children', which promote more of a critical perspective.
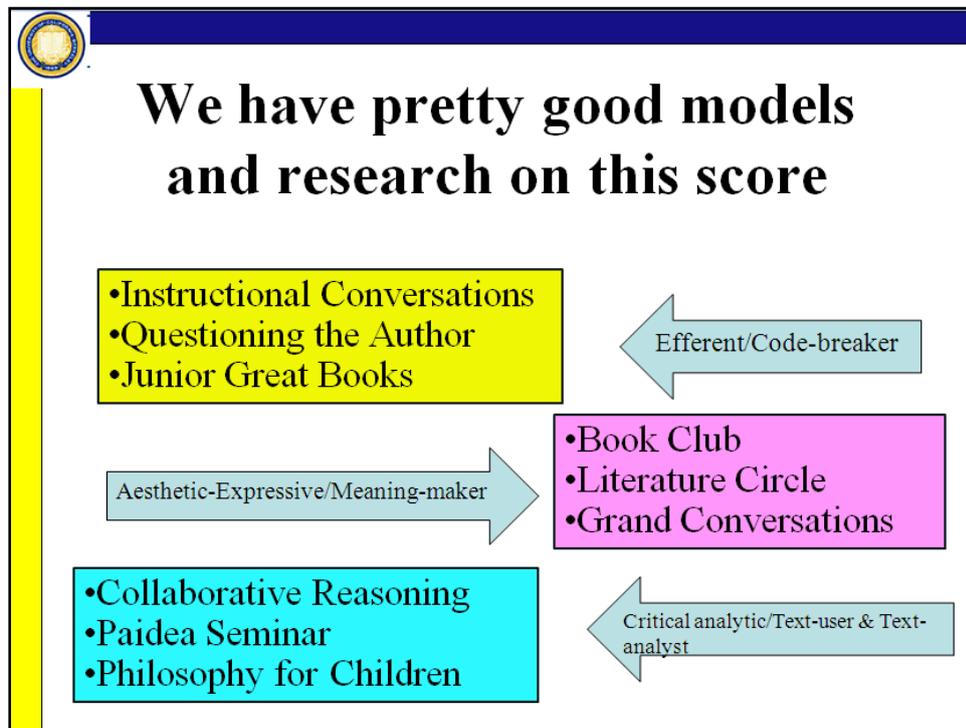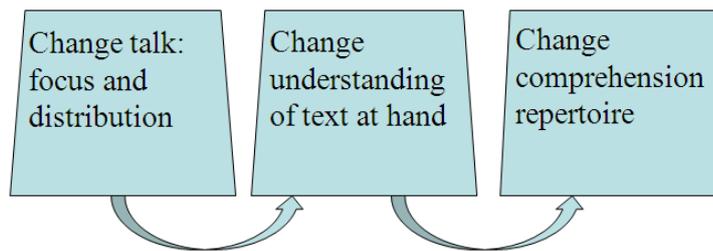

So, to put those words up there, the first three are what Louise Rosenblatt called 'efferent approaches' and, that is, they really focus on getting the meaning that's, quote, 'in the text' or that the author might have intended to put in the text. The three literary-oriented ones: book club, literature circle and grand conversations, are all about aesthetic or expressive response to literature. And then, finally, collaborative reasoning, the Paidea seminar and philosophy for children, are all about critical-analytic approaches. Now, again, to put those in the language that you're familiar with here in Australia, we might say that the efferent is a decoder, the aesthetic-expressive is the meaning-maker and the critical-analytic is the user and critic approaches, in the Four Roles.

Murphy et al Meta-analysis

- **What's the underlying theory of all of these interventions?**

Change talk: focus and distribution

Change understanding of text at hand

Change comprehension repertoire

So, the underlying theory in this meta-analysis that Murphy and her colleagues conducted was that if you change talk, the focus and the distribution of talk about text in a classroom – who's doing the talking; what they're talking about – that that, in turn, can influence the understanding of the text at hand. That is, because you've changed the nature and distribution of the talk, students understand things differently or understand things better. And that, if you do this again and again, that, over time, that will influence the repertoire of comprehension strategies that students are able to bring to printed text that they're going to read on their own tomorrow. So, the logic of this research is that if we change the nature of talk, we'll actually end up influencing the kinds of skills and strategies that kids can use independently to make sense of text.

The next finding is that they were able to achieve stronger effects on the distribution and the amount of talk, particularly the amount of student talk, than they were on comprehension. And I think what that says is that changes in the participation of students are a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for comprehension to change.

There's a lot of evidence that you get what you pay for, especially for critical thinking, and what this means is that if you emphasised text-based comprehension, kids got better at that; if you emphasised aesthetic and expressive comprehension, kids got better at that. And kids never got better at critical thinking or critical response to a text unless you went for it very, very directly. I think what that probably means for us as teachers is that you have to do it all. You have to have some aspects of literal comprehension, some aspects of inferential and some aspects of critical comprehension.

Changing talking about text seems to be more important for average and low achievers than it is for high achievers. In other words, the kids who are in the middle and the bottom of the achievement distribution were the ones who benefited the most from these interventions where we changed talk about text. And that's significant for me because I think, ironically, I don't know about you, but when I was a teacher I spent most of my time with my high achievers. The discussions went so well, they

allowed me to delude myself into thinking I was being a good teacher, when the truth of the matter is, I would have been much better off to spend more time with the average and low achievers. The high achievers didn't need my help to the degree that the others did.

Time matters – the longer the intervention, the better the results. Now, this is important, I think, for all of us because it means that we have to 'stay the course'. But, you know, what I find again and again when I work in schools is that people are willing to try a new approach. But if, in a few days, it doesn't seem to work, it'll be discarded and people will return to the practice that they used prior to the intervention. And I think the lesson here is that we do have to stay the course and we have to give a new approach to discussion a chance to take hold.

What I want to do now is to play an example of some clips of a videotape from a school in New York City. These kids are second and third graders; they all started kindergarten not being able to speak English at all, so they're all second-language learners. And I want you to pay attention to the teacher's role and see what it is that she does in this clip and then, secondly, I want you to see how the kids respond to one another and how they build off one another as they engage in this conversation.

When teachers promoted higher level talk about text and here, what I mean by that, is less of the literal stuff and more of the meaning-making and more of the critical analysis, that it always predicted achievement. And it didn't matter whether it was a first grade classroom or a fifth grade classroom or a sixth grade classroom; it didn't matter whether it was a rich school or a poor school; we almost always got that relationship. The hard thing to get teachers to do is to release their control of discussions and move them more from, if you will, recitations, where it's a rapid-fire exchange between the teacher and the student. I liken a recitation to a game of table tennis, where the teacher's on one side and the kids are all on the other side. And you don't get to respond, as a kid, unless I hit the ball to you.

Supporting talk about text

Conversational Move	Definition	Example (Student talk)	
Restating	Repeating a previous contribution	Linda said that the fish was sad, because he was lonely.	
Inviting	Inviting a participant to contribute	I'd like to hear what George thinks.	
Acknowledging or validating	Recognizing a response without agreeing or disagreeing	I can see why you said that. I get what you're saying. I hadn't thought of that.	
Focusing/refocusing	Making a metacomment about the course of the conversation	We were talking about the reasons that Frank ran away from home.	
Agreeing		I agree, because… Yeah. That's right, because…	
Disagreeing		I see what you're saying, but… But what about? I disagree, because…	
Elaborating	Extending one's own or another's assertion	I agree with Juan that the fish was lonely, and I think that he… Also…	
Requesting clarification or elaboration		What do you mean? Can you say more about that? What makes you think that?	
Providing an example	Providing an example from inside of the text or outside to support one's own or another's assertion. Examples can be explanatory or evidentiary	For example… It's like when…	
Signaling a change	Changing the direction of the conversation	I want to talk about the mother.	
Providing evidence			
Posing a question to the group		Does anyone think… ?	

So we started off with this chart (above), which lists down the left-hand side a lot of the conversational moves that we expect students to make in classrooms. Things like: restating what another person has said; inviting someone else to participate in the conversation; agreeing; disagreeing; focusing or refocusing the conversation; elaborating on a point that someone else might have brought up; giving an example of something that … a point that someone made. And we started off this and we gave the teachers a chart, but we only gave them these first three columns which, you know, labelled the moves, defined the moves and showed an example of what it looked like in teacher talk. We didn't have that last column that talks about scaffolding. These are little cues that teachers could use inside a classroom to encourage these kinds of conversational moves that are part of everyday conversation that you and I and our colleagues might have about just about anything. So, if we wanted to promote, for example, elaboration, we might say something like: 'Does anyone want to add a little bit to what Juan had to say about that point?' And these are just little, if you will, kind of prompts the teacher can use to promote this kind of student-centred conversational talk.

I now want to show you a video clip of the same teacher who we saw in the first clip, that she said exactly two things in the entire conversation. Once she said, 'Why?' and another time she said, 'What do you think of that?' But I want to show you that that same teacher doesn't always take such a reticent position. Sometimes, when the situation calls for it, she actually takes a more active position and does control the conversation more. Sometimes you do have to intervene and push the conversation one way or the other.

Now what I want you to see is a different teacher, who's working with younger kids – more novice readers. But she's providing much more scaffolding, obviously because these kids are younger and because they're not as experienced in this kind of conversational approach to text discussion.

To me, the metaphor of scaffolding is exactly right: that what teachers do in an environment is they intervene at just the right moment to provide just the right level of support to get the kids to reach just beyond their grasp so that they can manage to engage in almost a more adult-like conversation. We're sort of working in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and we're helping kids, as I say, reach just a little bit beyond their grasp.
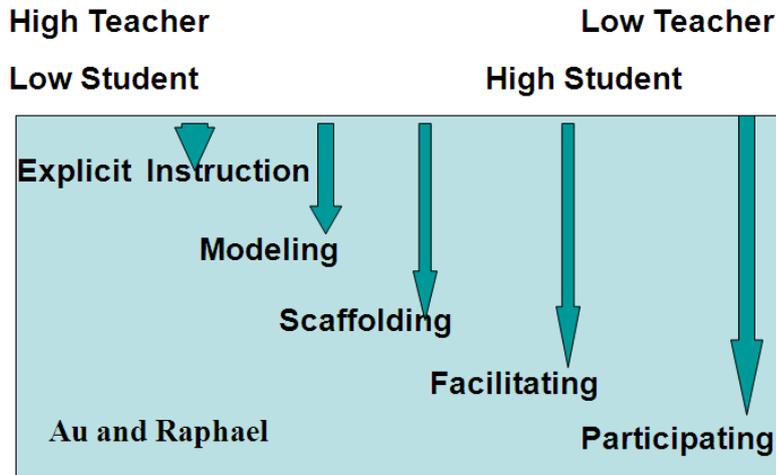
Gradual Release of Responsibility
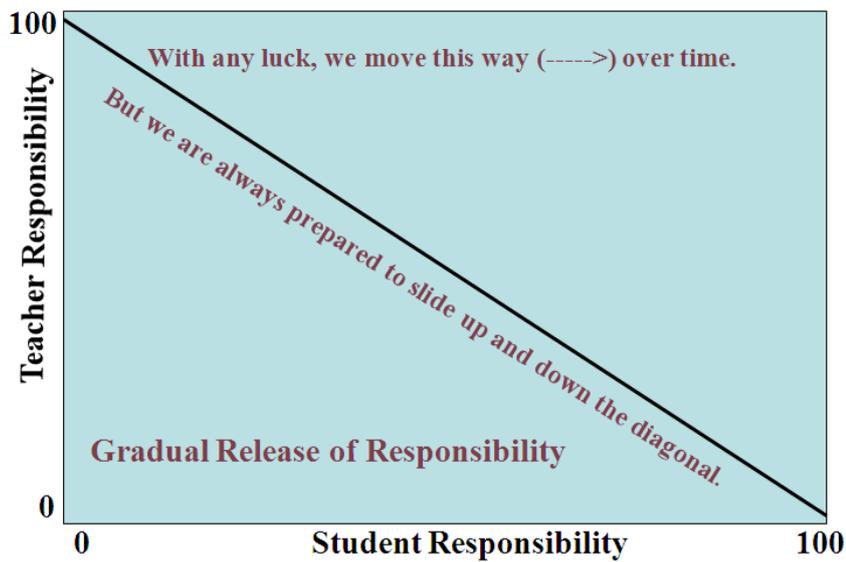
I liken it to this figure (above), which is one I've used for a long time. It's called a gradual release of responsibility. In the upper left-hand corner, where the teacher is taking all the responsibility for a task and the students are taking zero responsibility and then you can move down to the lower right corner where the students are taking all the responsibility and the teachers are taking no responsibility. That, if you will, is the goal that I think we have in our classrooms: to get students to be completely accountable and responsible for the conduct of their discussions and their activities in classrooms. But I like to use this gradual release of responsibility metaphor as a way of thinking about what our role is as teachers.

Changing Teacher Roles

High Teacher   **Low Teacher**

Low Student   **High Student**

Explicit Instruction

Modeling

Scaffolding

Facilitating

Au and Raphael

Participating

Now, my friends Kathy Au and Taffy Raphael (see above diagram) have named these different roles that you play: you go from high teacher, low student responsibility, to low teacher and high student responsibility. And if you're in the upper left-hand corner that's more like explicit instruction, maybe modelling; scaffolding and facilitating are more in the middle; and then finally, when you get down to that lower right-hand corner, you might say that your role as a teacher is one of a participant – you're just participating in the classroom environment in those discussions just like everyone else. Then we know that students are taking control of the conversations and responsibility for their understanding of texts.
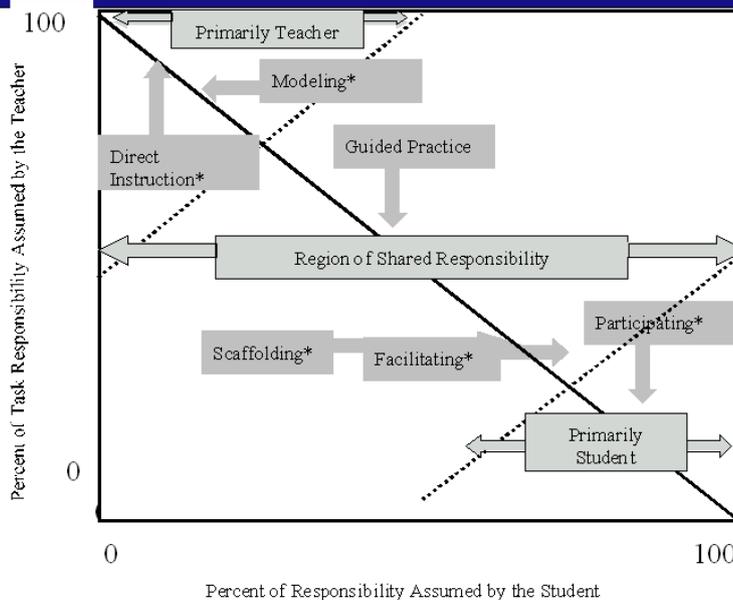
From Duke & Pearson

Now, Nell Duke and I (see diagram above) have superimposed Raphael and Au's terms onto the gradual release thing and we defined the upper left-hand quadrant – I guess it's not a quadrant, it's a … whatever a third is – that's the 'primarily teacher' zone of development, where the teacher's taking most of the responsibility, and we would put modelling and direct instruction in that zone. And then the region in the middle is what we call the 'region of shared responsibility'. This is where you do guided practice, scaffolding and facilitating. And then down in the lower right-hand corner is the 'primarily student' region of responsibility and that's where you're doing the participating.

Now, one of the questions that people always ask is: 'So how do you ask good questions about stories?' What I do is I read the text for the big ideas; I generate some probes to get at those big ideas; I have a general principle that I say I go from general to specific. So, I might say, 'So what's important about this story?' Well, if I ask that question and I don't get any response, then I provide a question that has some more scaffolding in it: 'So, is this story more about the plot or more about the characters?' And what I've done there is, instead of the kid having the universe of things to deal with, he's got a forced choice: plot or characters; you have to make a choice and then make a case for it. Or, if that doesn't work, I might ask something like: 'So what does this story tell us about how human beings look out for one another?' And notice how I provide much more information for the task. I go for response before comprehension, that is, I want to get kids' affective or expressive response before I go for comprehension. And the reason for that is that I want them to be able to share just their impressions about a story before I get too much into the factual details of the story, for fear that that will destroy the response.

This is what Lauren Resnick and Sarah Michaels call 'accountable talk' and the idea about accountable talk is that when you're a part of a classroom conversation, that you have some accountability to the text, that is, you have to show in the text where the support comes from for a claim that you make. And you're also accountable to your peers, that is, you have to say things that you can back up with evidence from the text or from your own experience and the like. And I think, finally, you should work for a unified understanding of plot, character, feelings and motives for a story.

My colleague, Scott Paris, has a little routine that he uses to get kids into a summary of a story and it's: 'Somewhere, sometime, somebody wanted a problem solved.' as a way of getting the kids in figuring out where the setting of the story is; who the main characters were; what their goal was; and then what kind of problem actually got solved.

Now, for expository texts, it's a little different. What I do there is I read the text; I record what I think the 'big' ideas are; I read it again and then I look for connections amongst those big ideas. And then what I do is I generate a set of questions that will get at those big ideas and the connections between them.

I actually think that conversations about stories and informational texts can be a context in which a lot of good strategy instruction can occur if we're willing to seize the teachable moments – what I call 'just-in-time' teaching – to show kids how they can use a strategy to solve a particular problem that may have come up in their understanding and to make a text sensible or meaningful.

There's a routine called 'instructional conversations' that Claude Goldenberg and William Saunders developed and the genius of that routine is that what they do in there is they actually embed all of

their strategy instruction right in their talk about text . And what they do is they'll say, 'Oh, this is a good time to do a summary. Now remember how we do a summary?' and they have a little, if you will, mini-lesson on how to do the summary and then they actually create a summary right there. And it seems to me that if you look at the Palinscar and Brown 'reciprocal teaching' approach, that you can embed strategies right into everyday talk about text. So I don't have any problem incorporating skill and strategy instruction into everyday talk about text. I think it's, in point of fact, quite a natural thing to do.

Promoting comprehension requires that strong background of effective instruction in skills and strategies; you have to have had solid instruction on enabling skills, such as phonics and fluency; and you have to have a good assessment portfolio. And then, of course, there's rich talk about text. And what we're trying to do in this rich talk about text is to maximise student engagement and control over the conversations; careful scaffolding to achieve that engagement and control; and our ultimate goal is to turn things over to the students so that they can have a conversation about a text. And a conversation, not a recitation, is the real-world model of talk about text.