The following is a guide to the key points in my talk. These points and all transcripts and some cartoons are in my book *Opening Minds: Using language to change lives*. Much of my talk expanded on Vygotsky’s (1978) observation that “Children grow into the intellectual life around them” and his observation that cognitive growth is “more likely when one is required to explain, elaborate, or defend one’s position to others as well as to oneself; striving for an explanation, often makes a learner integrate and elaborate knowledge in new ways.” I also promoted the idea of what it means to take seriously children’s thinking together and the idea that the adult is not the only teacher in the classroom.

I pointed out that events happen in the classroom, but students don’t know what they mean until teachers put a layer of language over the top – as Michael Halliday puts it, “Language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge.”

The examples of teacher talk I used contained the threads that serve the following fundamental human needs:

- A sense of autonomy
- A sense of belonging
- A sense of competence
- A sense of meaningfulness

### Teaching children to think together

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Teaching children to think together (not just alone)</strong> is important because: compared with controls, children taught how to think together, show an increase in:</th>
<th><strong>Teaching to think together is helped by:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning ability</td>
<td>Start with engaging problems or discussions in which children are likely to disagree or bring different perspectives (see dialogic classrooms below). Help children generate rules for their conversations, e.g. for problem-solving discussions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>An example from problem solving might be:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expressive language</td>
<td>- We listen, and respect each others’ ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative thinking</td>
<td>- Everyone gets to be heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examining assumptions</td>
<td>- We give reasons when we agree or disagree, and we ask for reasons when people forget to give them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willingness to speak in public</td>
<td>- Everyone is responsible for group decisions, so we try to agree.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willingness to listen to and consider others’ ideas</td>
<td>Help them reflect on their discussions through the lens of the rules they’ve created to improve their ability to participate effectively.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of providing reasons or evidence for their view</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of interpersonal relationships</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence, self-esteem and persistence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supportive group interactions (along with a reduction in negative comments)</td>
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When children are thinking together about books dialogically, they use strategies publicly and those strategies are taken up by others, just as Vygotsky said, as follows (Dong et al 2008):

- Once a strategy has been used once in the discussion, the probability that it will be used a second time is .88. If used a second time the probability of a third use is .90.
- Time to first use of a particular strategy = 6 minutes. Time to second use = 3 minutes. Time to third use about a minute and a half.
- By the time a strategy appears in the conversation 6 times it is being used by 46 percent of the students. If used eight or more times, it is being used by 69 percent of the students.
Dialogic Classrooms are Characterized by the Following Language:

Symmetrical power relationships and mutual engagement
- Ask open questions – ones that could have multiple answers
- Use uncertainty markers: maybe, perhaps, I wonder
- Invite multiple perspectives: “Are there any other ways to think about that? Any other opinions?” “Can anyone push back against that?”
- Offer ample wait time
- No judgment of ideas – yes, good, well..., right.
- Practice with turn-and-talks
- Do not repeat children’s good ideas so the class can hear them (then they know they only have to listen to you). Instead, ask children to report to the class what their partner had to say rather than what they had to say.
- Remind children to speak directly to each other rather than through you
- Position the students in a circle so they can speak and listen to each other and see each other’s reactions.
- Arrange for class members to manage turn-taking without you (perhaps calling on each other, etc.)
- Position yourself physically as much as possible at the same level, and either in the circle or outside it.

Language for understanding how to think together and valuing doing so (extended exchanges among 3 or more students, more follow-up questions)
- Can we build that idea bigger?
- I notice Laurel that when he was talking it sort of jogged your mind – what were you thinking?
- Make sure each person has a chance to say something so that your learning grows from each other.
- When you put those two ideas together for us, it helped us to understand that...
- I heard each of you sharing your ideas with your partner. These great ideas will help us to understand the story better!
- Building a conversation:
  - I wonder, perhaps, I think
  - That’s like
  - I agree with you (because)
  - I disagree with you (because)
  - I can add on (I agree, and)
  - I have evidence
  - What do you mean? I’m confused.
  - What are you thinking?
  - What could we do about that?

Significance of Dialogic Classrooms:
“Students recalled their readings better, understood them in more depth, and responded more fully to aesthetic elements of literature than did students in more typical, monologically organized classes” Dialogic classrooms overcome the potential disadvantages of SES, track, race, and ethnicity. (Nystrand, 2006)

Language to Expand Social Imagination:
Use mental verbs and mental state language, particularly in the context of other people’s minds. For example:
- I wonder what she’s thinking right now?
- How do you think she feels? Why do you think she feels angry?
- If you were in his position, what would you be feeling right now?
- Show me with your face how he feels.

Children with a stronger social imagination:
- Are more able to understand complex narratives, idiomatic expressions and irony
- Have more positive social skills,
- Are more socially cooperative,
- Have larger social networks,
- Are viewed more positively by peers,
- Misbehave less at home and school,
- Have fewer angry responses in personal interactions.
- Have stronger moral development
- Have better self-regulation

Effects of Focusing on Engagement
Effects of Focusing on Engagement:
- Average reading volume went from three books/year to 42 books/year.
- 13% then 16% more students passed the state competency test with a reduction in achievement gaps across subgroups.
• Increased; strategic /engaged reading, expectation of meaningfulness, strategy generation, stamina.
• Increased thinking together dialogically inside and outside school including symmetrical power arrangements, taking up conflicting perspectives.
• Improved social relationships, including engaging new people (valuing diversity), expanded trust, and engaging parents in new ways.
• Improved social imagination, increased empathy
• Increased academic, emotional and behavioral self-regulation
• Increased sense of moral agency - less judgmental of people, but prepared to call out problematic behavior.
• More productive identities and agentive narrative trajectories.
• Increased happiness

A Disposition toward Resilience: The tendency to maintain a focus on learning when the going gets tough. It’s opposite is brittleness – the tendency to avoid challenging tasks and to shift into ego-defensive behaviors when learning is difficult (Carr & Claxton, 2002).

Some language choices to reconsider

Think carefully about the praise you use. Remember that when children are engaged in an activity, praise only distracts them from the engagement and risks shifting their goal to pleasing you. Turn children’s attention to the successful parts of new things they are trying, and how they are doing them. Focus their explanations on process-strategies and effort, not on personal traits.

In general, remember that it is not praise that is central, but the information that a strategy was successful, what it was, and what it accomplished. Pointing out that “I like the way you figured out that problem by yourself” provides the child with an agentive narrative – a sense of independence. However, at the same time, the “I like the way you…” part is a distraction and sets the goal of pleasing you. Consider “When you….. you figured that out by yourself (or by yourselves).” That’s probably enough. Sometimes it’s good to add, “can you think of another way you could have figured it out?” which builds flexibility. If you feel you need to add some praise on top of that, you could add “Nice job” which, although it judges, doesn’t open a fixed frame.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Possible Alternatives</th>
<th>Logic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person-criticism like, “I’m disappointed in you.”</td>
<td>“Maybe you could find another way to do it.” “You didn’t really get a chance to fix that yet.” “How could you do it differently?”</td>
<td>Reduces the risk of undermining a feeling of respect and viewing problem as a trait. Turns attention to solving temporary problems and building agency/resilience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person praise like, “I’m proud of you” or “You’re good at this”</td>
<td>“How did you do that?” “You found a good way to do it. Could you think of another way.” “You must have worked hard at that.”</td>
<td>Person praise on success encourages child to infer person criticism on failure (even if you don’t say it) which undermines resilience. Alternatives turn attention to process-strategy and effort, and build resilience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You’re really smart”</td>
<td>“You really worked hard” “You used some great strategies. That must have been fun”</td>
<td>Smart (as a trait) is not something you have control of, effort and process are. Unsuccessful events invite the child to attribute the trait ‘not-smart.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I like the way you…”</td>
<td>“Look at how you did that, you….” When you did x, y happened.</td>
<td>Keeps child in control, focuses on the process (and preferably the consequence), and doesn’t shift the goal towards pleasing the adult.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Good girl.”  
“Thanks.”  

Judgment offers an asymmetrical power relationship, “Thanks,” not only offers a symmetrical power relationship but encourages community contributions. “Good girl” is global praise and invites its opposite when the child is not successful.

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**Belief System Frames**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamic/Learning frame</th>
<th>Fixed/Performance frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The more you learn the smarter you get. Smartness, minds, who you become can be changed.</td>
<td>People have fixed traits such as smartness, intelligence and personality that they cannot change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning takes time and effort, so trying hard is valued.</td>
<td>Learning happens quickly for smart people so trying hard is not valued - if you have to try hard you probably aren’t smart.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The most important information is how someone did (or could do) something because that’s what we can learn from.</td>
<td>The most important information is whether one is successful. It shows who is smart and more valuable. How one succeeds is irrelevant. (Cheating - lying justifiable routes to success.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The goal is to learn as much as you can.</td>
<td>The goal is to look as smart as you can.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent success without trying hard indicates choosing activities that are too easy to learn from.</td>
<td>Frequent success without trying is an indicator of one’s (fixed) ability and value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems/challenges/errors are to be expected if a person is taking on challenge – which is valued (even experts/authors make mistakes).</td>
<td>Problems/challenges/errors are indicators of one’s intellectual ability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging and novel activities are engaging.</td>
<td>Challenging and novel activities are risky/stressful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value collaboration and believe that success requires it, along with, interest, and efforts to comprehend. Seeking help is sensible after exhausting one’s own resources.</td>
<td>Value competition and believe that success requires ability and a competitive focus. Seeking help is evidence of one’s intellectual inadequacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater competence means being able to take on new challenges and greater opportunity to help others.</td>
<td>Greater competence means being smarter and therefore better (and more valuable) than others, and potentially having power over others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each row in the belief system table offers an aspect of conversation in which you can shift the frame.

**Consequences of Belief System Frames**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamic-Learning frame</th>
<th>Fixed-Performance frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explain behaviors in terms of mental processes and context.</td>
<td>Explain behaviors in terms of permanent traits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose challenging activities in which you will learn as much as possible. Get into your zone of proximal development (zpd).</td>
<td>Choose activities that make you look smart, easy enough to be successful but just below your zpd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When encounter difficulty, engage in self-monitoring and self-instruction, increase strategic efforts, don’t see self as failing.</td>
<td>When encounter difficulty, they see it as failure, question their ability, assign blame for failure, and cease acting strategically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What advice would they give to a peer who is having difficulty? Lots of strategic advice.</td>
<td>Minimal advice, and sometimes sympathy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel smart when taking on challenge or teaching others.</td>
<td>Feel smart when do it better or faster than others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do they make of a new child in class who misbehaves (or does badly on work)? Probably not a bad student, Probably better in a couple of weeks.</td>
<td>Probably a bad student, probably much the same in a couple of weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When faced with transgressions, tries to understand the thinking and the context that produced the behavior, and</td>
<td>When faced with transgressions invoke punishment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Forgive and educate the transgressor.

| When faced with disagreements in the process of learning: engage the disagreement and try to synthesize the views. Enhances view of partner in the process. | Turns the disagreement into a relational confrontation. Puts partner down. |
| Slow to judge and form stereotypes | Judge quickly, and form stereotypes |
| Older students think education is to help people understand the world and to prepare them for socially useful work. | Older students think the purpose of education is to enhance wealth and socioeconomic status. |

To open a dynamic frame emphasize the following themes:

- Mistakes are normal when you’re learning – fix them.
- Problems are normal and are where we learn
- We are all changing and growing
- Focus on the process

Examples:

- (e.g. introducing the computer room) This is where you’ll be doing things like typing stories, which is really hard but you’ll be able to do it by the end of the year.
- I don’t think you could do that last month. Now you can.
- What problems did you encounter today?
- How did you figure that out? How else could you figure it out?

The Bottom Line:

1. Teachers’ language is their most powerful tool.
2. We have to take seriously the fact that the adult is not the only teacher in the room.
3. It is not enough to teach individual minds.
4. Multiple perspectives and uncertainty (without stress) are engines of dialogic engagement.
5. Making meaning is good. Doing meaningful things is better.
6. Children’s academic development and their social development are inseparable. We need to teach children how to think together and live together. A singular focus on academics will not serve children or their academic development well.
7. Social imagination is a hub of social and academic development and self-regulation.
8. We should take seriously the fact that the adult is not the only teacher in the room.
9. Teachers and students are human beings. Consequently, they need a sense of autonomy, belonging, and competence, and they need their work to be meaningful and engaging. Focusing on engagement changes everything.

Recommended Readings


Favorite books with great examples of language in context:


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