Knowledge-Building Conversations

Intentional conversations give students opportunities to process content, explain their thinking, use new vocabulary, respond to others' ideas, and deepen their knowledge. Effective knowledge-building conversations are planned around what students are learning, while still leaving space for students to observe, question, reason, and build on one another's thinking.

Different conversation formats serve different purposes. Some increase participation, some support rich and increasingly student-led discussion, and others provide tightly structured practice using new vocabulary.

Strategies and Supports for Knowledge-Building Conversations

These are not separate discussion types. They are strategies teachers can use across many kinds of conversations and discussions.

Participation Structures

These structures increase the number of students who actively process and talk about content. They can be incorporated into many of the discussion techniques below.

Structure/Goal	Steps	Example
Total Group Response Goal: Engage the whole class simultaneously and promote equity of voice.	1. Pose a question or prompt everyone can answer. 2. Select a response method. 3. Have all students respond at the same time. 4. Follow with discussion when explanation is needed.	Students respond with thumbs up/down, another hand signal, movement, a verbal response in unison, or a response to a partner.
Partner Talk Goal: Give every student an opportunity to rehearse ideas, use target vocabulary, and process content aloud.	1. Plan an intentional question. 2. Identify vocabulary students could use. 3. Provide a sentence stem or scaffold as needed. 4. Partners take turns speaking and listening. 5. Encourage students to respond using Accountable Talk. 6. Bring ideas back to the larger group when appropriate.	**Question:** "Why did Farfallina climb into the tree?" **Vocabulary:** *transform*, *chrysalis*, *caterpillar* **Stem:** "Farfallina climbed into the tree because…" **Response:** "I agree because…"

Knowledge-Building Conversations

Discussion Techniques

Notice and Wonder

Goal: Use observation and curiosity to activate, assess, and build knowledge.

Steps

1. Present a photograph, object, primary source, scientific phenomenon, text, or other shared stimulus.
2. Ask, **"What do you notice?"**
3. Give students time to observe and discuss.
4. Ask, **"What do you wonder?"**
5. Encourage students to respond to one another and connect observations to what they already know.
6. Use Partner Talk, Accountable Talk, and TALK as appropriate to deepen the discussion.

Example: Display an image showing stages of a butterfly life cycle. Students might notice changes in body structure, identify a chrysalis, or wonder how long each stage takes. The teacher can listen for and reinforce words such as *transform*, *metamorphosis*, and *chrysalis*.

Notice and Wonder promotes observation, curiosity, critical thinking, and oral language and can be used across subject areas.

Gallery Walk

Goal: Build or deepen knowledge by discussing multiple sources, perspectives, examples, or representations.

Steps

1. Select several images, documents, artifacts, questions, or other "exhibits."
2. Arrange students in small groups.
3. Groups rotate from source to source.
4. Students observe and discuss what they notice and think.
5. Students may record thinking on chart paper or sticky notes.
6. The teacher circulates, listens for misconceptions, clarifies when necessary, and uses TALK to deepen thinking.

Example: During a geology unit, students rotate through photographs and samples showing different rock characteristics, discussing observations and applying content vocabulary.

Gallery Walks are particularly useful when students are **comparing ideas or building background knowledge across multiple sources.**

Knowledge-Building Conversations

Fishbowl

Goal: Support student-led academic discussion while also giving other students an opportunity to observe strong discussion behaviors.

Steps

1. Begin with an open-ended question.
2. A small group—the "fish"—discusses the topic.
3. Other students observe and listen without interrupting.
4. The teacher facilitates as needed using TALK rather than directing every exchange.
5. An open chair may allow observers to enter temporarily to ask a question or contribute an idea.
6. Debrief both the content and the discussion behaviors students observed.

Example: After completing mineral tests, a small group discusses what their observations suggest about different minerals while classmates listen for how speakers explain ideas, use evidence, and respond to one another.

Because the number of speakers is limited, Fishbowl promotes active listening and can model the social communication skills required for thoughtful academic discussion.

Socratic Seminar

Goal: Engage the whole class in a student-driven discussion that deepens understanding of a shared text or topic.

Steps

1. Identify a content-rich text, topic, or set of sources.
2. Give students an opportunity to prepare their ideas beforehand. Older students may write; younger students may draw or build from an earlier discussion.
3. Arrange students so they can respond to one another.
4. Open with a substantive, open-ended question.
5. Students discuss the question and build on one another's thinking.
6. The teacher facilitates and scaffolds rather than controlling the conversation.
7. Gradually decrease teacher support as students become more proficient.

K–1 example:
"What do you like about the past? What do you prefer about the present?"

2–5 example:
"How does this connect to what we read in the novel?" or "What does this legend remind you of?"

Socratic Seminar is intended to become increasingly student-led. Younger students need shorter discussions and more scaffolding; older students can sustain longer discussions with a more limited teacher role.

Gradual Release of Responsibility for Discussion Techniques

When introducing these discussion techniques, the courses emphasize establishing procedures first: tell students what will happen, model what you expect, remind them of expectations, and gradually release responsibility for the discussion to students.

Structured Conversations for Targeted Vocabulary Practice

These routines are more constrained than the discussion techniques above. Students are intentionally prompted to use a specific target word as they apply what they know about the content topic. The course describes these as especially useful when students have developed some receptive knowledge of a word and are ready to move toward expressive use.

Prove It

Goal: Use content knowledge and a target vocabulary word to justify a factual statement.

Steps

1. Select a content concept students have already encountered.
2. Identify a Tier 2 or Tier 3 target word students need to use expressively.
3. Create a factual statement containing the target word.
4. Provide an image, document, object, or other source students can use as evidence.
5. Turn the statement into a sentence stem.
6. Students discuss with a partner and complete the stem, often using a conjunction such as **because**.
7. Invite students to explain the evidence that "proves" the statement.

K–1 example:
"This is a sedimentary rock because…"
"This is a sedimentary rock because it has layers."

Knowledge-building purpose: Students retrieve content knowledge, apply a new word in context, and explain the reasoning behind a factual claim.

Knowledge-Building Conversations

This or That

Goal: Apply content knowledge and target vocabulary while forming and justifying an opinion.

Steps

1. Identify a content concept and target word students need to use.
2. Pose a question with **two choices and no single correct answer.**
3. Include the target vocabulary in the prompt or expected response.
4. Students choose one option, often by moving to one side of the room.
5. Students explain their choice to a partner using a sentence stem and the target word.
6. Extend the conversation with Accountable Talk or whole-group discussion.

K–1 example:
"Which animal gave Hermit Crab more **protection** from predators?"
"In my opinion, the sea urchins gave Hermit Crab more protection because they are sharp."

2–5 example:
"Which branch of government is most **influential**: the legislative branch or the executive branch?"
"In my opinion, the legislative branch is more influential because it creates the laws."

This or That promotes **critical thinking, expressive vocabulary, and deeper content knowledge**, and it can also serve as oral rehearsal before opinion writing.

Vocabulary Practice and Word-Consciousness Activities

Vocabulary Charades

Goal: Reinforce the meaning of previously taught vocabulary through movement and word retrieval.

Steps

1. Reuse vocabulary cards students have already learned.
2. A student chooses a card.
3. The student acts out the word without saying it.
4. Classmates identify the word.
5. When useful, extend the game by asking students to explain the word or connect it to content they have studied.

Best use: Transitions, morning meeting, review, or quick brain breaks after students have had several exposures to the words.

Knowledge-Building Conversations

Vocabulary Headbands

Goal: Strengthen word meaning by requiring students to describe vocabulary using semantic clues.

Steps

1. Place a previously taught vocabulary card on a student's headband without allowing the student to see it.
2. Classmates give verbal clues.
3. The student uses those clues to identify the word.
4. Rotate students and vocabulary words.
5. After students know the routine, it can become increasingly independent practice.

Discussion Strategies and Goals

Strategy/Goal	What it Looks Like	Examples
Equity of Voice Goal: Ensure all students have meaningful opportunities to talk, think, and use new language.	Plan intentionally for who will speak and how students will participate rather than relying primarily on teacher talk and individual volunteers.	Use Partner Talk, Total Group Response, wait time, language scaffolds, and intentional grouping so more students contribute.
TALK Goal: Deepen knowledge and language during conversations.	**Tune In:** Listen, notice, and comment on students' thinking. **Ask Open-Ended Questions:** Invite explanation and reasoning. **Lift Language:** Honor students' ideas while modeling or scaffolding more advanced vocabulary and syntax. **Keep It Going:** Encourage students to elaborate and respond to one another.	"I heard you say…" "Why do you think…?" "Another way we could say that is…" "Who can build on that idea?" TALK can support pairs, small groups, or whole-class discussions.
Accountable Talk Goal: Help students respond to and build on one another's thinking.	Teach a small number of sentence stems and gradually add more as students become comfortable using them.	"I agree because…" "I disagree because…" "I would like to add…" "I think that because…"

Knowledge-Building Conversations

HABLA Goal: Make conversations accessible and affirming for multilingual learners.	**H**onor the child's first language and attempts to communicate. **A**sk questions and allow ample response time. **B**uild on responses. **L**ink the first language to English. **A**dd visuals, gestures, and props.	A student responds partly in a first language and points to an image. The teacher acknowledges the idea, builds on it, connects it to the English term, and uses the image to reinforce meaning.
Safety Nets/Language Scaffolds Goal: Help students express ideas using increasingly precise language.	Give enough support for students to produce the language rather than immediately supplying the answer.	Phonemic cue, either/or choice, fill-in-the-blank prompt, synonym prompt, visual support, or teacher restatement using more advanced vocabulary and syntax.