SCOE **Bulletin** MAR 2010
Sonoma County Office of Education

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF STUDENT RESPONSE

In classrooms across Sonoma County, teachers are searching for ways to heighten student engagement. They understand that an engaged student is one who actively participates and constantly thinks about what's being presented—and they know that this type of engagement is key to academic success across the curriculum and at all grade levels.

As today's schools work to raise student achievement, they aren't looking for just a couple of students sitting in the front of a classroom with hands held high whenever a question is asked. They want *every student* to be actively thinking and able to demonstrate their learning in observable ways. They want *every student* to apply the language, skills, and concepts that flow from the content of instruction.

Researchers have conjectured that much of the learning process is embedded in the academic conversations that take place in the classroom and that these conversations are essential to helping students acquire critical language and thinking skills. When students participate in classroom discussions using language that is increasingly precise and relevant to academic topics, they become more engaged in learning and the quality and quantity of their responses grow.

But this goal—producing a classroom of engaged, thinking students—can be challenging when a class includes students who aren't proficient in English or who otherwise struggle academically. To ensure the active engagement of these students, teachers must scaffold instruction linguistically and academically.

Over the past three years, SCOE has been working with local teachers to develop effective classroom strategies that increase the academic engagement of all learners. A team of school improvement, language arts, and mathematics specialists have developed a framework—Building Options for Discourse: Students and Teachers Responding (BODSTR)—and are helping teachers

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Pictured above:
Valeria Gabriel and Jesenia Lopez, fourth-graders at Kawana School, take part in "rehearsal time" during a Think-Pair-Share exercise.

implement it by providing demonstration lessons and onsite support in selected classrooms across the county. Using this framework, teachers plan lessons that include three key strategies:

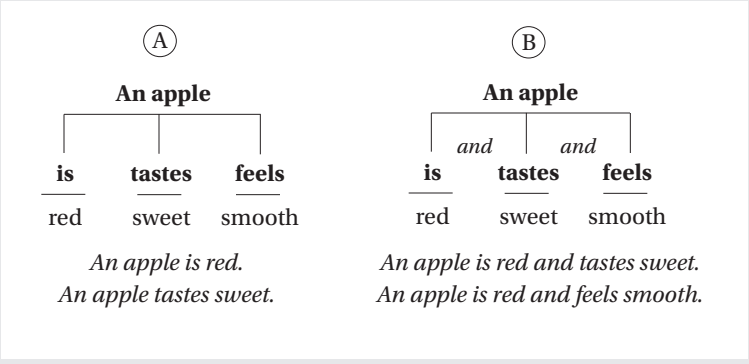
- Scaffolding thinking and language
- Providing rehearsal time
- Holding students accountable for listening and responding

SCAFFOLDING THINKING & LANGUAGE

Many Sonoma County teachers are using graphic organizers like Thinking Maps® to give students a standardized way of organizing information around academic skills and concepts. Students use Thinking Maps to process learning across the curriculum—to define, describe, sort and classify, look for causes and effects, compare and contrast, make analogies, sequence, or explore part-to-whole and whole-to-part relationships. Because Thinking Maps are visual, students are better able to see and discuss the knowledge they are acquiring. This is a key scaffolding tool, which is especially effective when used in conjunction with the strategies described below.

- **Talking Off the Map:** When students "talk off the map," they take the information they've organized on a Thinking Map and form statements and questions that can be shared with their peers. For example, when using a Tree Map to describe an apple, a student can use the structure of the map to develop sentences (see figure A below).

  To further scaffold student responses, the teacher might add conjunctions between the branches of the map (figure B), allowing students to visualize how the words fit together to build compound sentences.



- **Response Frames:** Response frames teach word order and correct vocabulary usage while giving students a context for expressing themselves. By providing the basic structure of a sentence, response frames allow students to insert language that describes their thinking without having to worry about sentence construction. Response frames can also prod students to think at a deeper level as they justify or explain their thoughts:

  Frame: I believe that if _____, then _____ because _____.

  Response: I believe that if all students are required to wear school uniforms, then academic achievement will increase because students will focus on their studies rather than trying to impress their friends.

PROVIDING REHEARSAL TIME

Rehearsal strategies allow students to practice their responses before reporting out in whole-class settings. During rehearsal, students work in pairs or small groups, using interactive structures that require all partners and group members to speak and listen.

Because all students participate in rehearsal, they all benefit from the academic interaction these strategies provide—but the strategies are especially beneficial for English learners. Rehearsal techniques give these students needed opportunities to hear language models, practice language skills, and speak about academic content in safe, small-group settings.

There are a variety of ways that teachers can organize rehearsal time for students. Here are three common strategies.

- **Buddy Buzz** (also known as elbow or row partners): Teachers ask students to turn to a partner and discuss a topic, practice a skill, or give an opinion. As the partners talk, the teacher circulates and listens in. After the partners share for a few moments, several students are selected to report out to the entire class.
- **Think-Pair-Share:** This is a more structured pair activity where each student is assigned a letter, A or B. The teacher asks a question or poses a problem. Partner A speaks for a specified time (say, two minutes) while partner B listens. The roles are then reversed, with partner B speaking and A listening. At the conclusion of partner B's time, responses are shared with the whole class. Teachers often post response frames as a scaffold for partner discussions and whole-class sharing.
- **Numbered Heads Together:** Students form small groups and each member of the group is assigned a number: 1, 2, 3, or 4. The teacher poses a problem and students "put their heads together" to reach a conclusion. The teacher ends the discussion time by selecting one number to act as spokesperson—for example, the number 3 student from each group would report. Because no one knows what number will be called, all team members must prepare to present their group's findings.

HOLDING STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE FOR LISTENING & RESPONDING

Randomly calling on students can foster the expectation that all students must be accountable for their learning and take responsibility for listening and responding. This can create a dynamic learning environment, as described in this passage from *Classroom Discussions:*

> "When a teacher succeeds in setting up a classroom in which students feel obligated to listen to one another, to make their own contributions clear and comprehensible, and to provide evidence for their claims, that teacher has set in place a powerful context for student learning.*"

Using response strategies that hold students accountable motivates students to be prepared to answer questions, summarize findings, and report opinions accurately to the whole class. This not only increases student attentiveness to learning, but also provides an opportunity for teachers to check student understanding throughout a lesson.

Teachers can implement simple strategies to engage all students in listening and participating.

- **Whip Around:** Here, the teacher asks all students with a specific number or letter in Think-Pair-Share or Numbered Heads Together groupings to present for their partner or group. For example, all B partners would stand and share, whipping around the room from one student to the next until all groups have reported out.
- **Popsicle Sticks or Name Cards:** Student names are written on popsicle sticks or index cards. The teacher randomly selects one stick or card and calls on that student to share.

STRATEGIES IN ACTION: THREE EXAMPLES

The engagement strategies described above are highlighted in three demonstration lessons developed by SCOE education specialists serving on the Sonoma County Achievement Team (SoCAT), an initiative designed to assist schools and districts in their improvement efforts. SoCAT team members Josh Deis, Peggy Buzanski, and Lynn Fitzpatrick take their expertise to local schools to help teachers implement new, more effective instructional practices. In these examples, they modeled student engagement strategies, then supported teachers in incorporating the strategies into their lessons.

1 Rehearsal using partner talk

Math specialist Josh Deis used a Think-Pair-Share routine to help fifth-grade students gain a better understanding of addition using negative numbers. Deis grouped the students in pairs and designated them partner A or B. He asked—*When a negative number is added to a negative number, why is the answer always a negative number?*—then gave the students two minutes to think about the answer. They were to ponder why this is true and how they would explain their understanding.

Every student—first As, then Bs—had two minutes to present their ideas to a partner. Deis roamed the room and listened to the pair discussions, which gave him valuable feedback about what the students understood and what still needed to be clarified.

At the end of the pair time, Deis asked all A students to stand and share their thinking using this response frame: *I think that a negative plus a negative is always a negative because* _____.

Through this activity, all students were able to rehearse their answer with a partner before they were expected to share with the whole class. This gave the students an opportunity to hear other responses and compare them to their own, while increasing the academic talk time for all students.

Pictured above: *Third-graders at Kawana School create Tree Maps about the story they are reading, then trade work with a partner. Pictured (clockwise from left) are Melecio Estrada, Camilo Carranza, Peggy Buzanski, Andrew Fisher, Roberto Santana, and Marina Diaz.*

2 Explain someone else's thinking

Language arts specialist Peggy Buzanski presented a third-grade lesson designed to help students understand character, setting, and plot. She had the students use a Tree Map to classify story elements from the Houghton Mifflin story, *Across the*

* *Classroom Discussions: Using Math Talk to Help Students Learn*, by Suzanne H. Chapin, Catherine O'Connor, and Nancy Canavan Anderson, 2003