Building Communication Skills in the Language Arts Classroom
Ilana B. Mahler

**The Project and Project Goal**

The focus of this project is to explicitly work on developing students’ skills relevant to communicating with clarity and precision.

On a weekly basis, students participate in a discussion-based class activity. The purpose of these activities is to provide students with opportunities to consciously practice speaking and being heard by their peers and, in return, students are also consciously practicing actively listening to their peers.

The end goal is for students to feel more confident and capable of verbally expressing their thoughts and feelings in a public, but low-stakes, setting.

**Critique & Revision**

Students often reflect on their skill building and consider what improvements they have observed in themselves. As the classroom teacher, I adjust my practices to meet student interest and need.

**Public Product**

Discussions are conducted in front of peers; students’ public product is the verbal expression of their thoughts and ideas.

**Challenging Question**

How can we communicate with one another in a way that makes us feel heard and allows us to hear what our peers are saying?

**Related Research Informing My Practice**


This resource offers suggestions for facilitating discussion groups and lesson plans focused on communication.

“This classroom circles support the two main goals of restorative practices: building community; and responding to harms through dialogue that sets things right.”


This resource outlines the necessity for social learning in Language Arts classrooms as a way of encouraging students to practice empathy.

“Connected learning ... draws upon the field of new literacy studies, an approach that stresses literacy as a social practice rather than a set of technical skills.”

**Context**

Context is extremely important to consider for a project such as this. Class discussion topics may often explore current events or issues of a serious nature. Students may also feel inclined to share personal experiences that could evoke a strong emotional response in themselves and/or their peers. The steps a teacher takes to prepare their students for these discussions is dependent on context of the class, school, district, etc. For the context of my classroom, I focus primarily on how adverse childhood experiences may influence the class conversations.

In my two 11th grade classes, there are several students who have experienced one or more adverse childhood experiences. Developmental trauma can greatly affect an adolescent’s ability or willingness to communicate effectively. This can directly affect their social and emotional well-being, because communication is essential for dealing with both interpersonal conflict and internalized thoughts and emotions. To meet the needs of the students in my classes, I have carefully scaffolded the discussion activities so that students know what to expect and can work their way towards sharing personal experiences and reflections. I have also spent time building an inclusive classroom climate, so that students can share without fearing how their peers may react.

**Findings & Next Steps**

Initially, students expressed discomfort and feelings of vulnerability when faced with these unfamiliar discussion activities. After practicing a few times over the course of several weeks, students appeared much more relaxed and eager to participate. Additionally, many students who rarely speak up in class have used these activities as an opportunity to share their thoughts with the class. Personally, I have gained a deeper insight into who my students are just from listening to them during these activities.

Working on communication and empathy skills are areas that we will continue to work on up until the end of the year. So far, we have primarily practiced basic discussion circles focusing on topics relating to opinion and experience. As we move into the end of the school year, I will encourage the students in my classes to think critically about themselves as individuals in society. I will ask them to question their beliefs and consider how their actions and decisions affect the lives of other members of society.