

# Building Communication Skills in the Language Arts Classroom

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## Participants

The individuals I am working with for this project are the two 11th grade classes at the vocational school where I teach. The classes range from 15-20 students per class. These students are primarily 16-17-year-olds. They vary greatly in their academic interests, motivation to socialize, and preferred method of learning. I am especially focused on including students who have remained resistant to participating in the communication activities.

I developed this project for a classroom environment, because communication skills are important and relevant to all the students' lives. Whether these students are heading to college or entering the career field after graduating next year, communication skills will be necessary for navigating whatever social setting they find themselves in. Communicating is an essential part of society and, to better the students' chances at finding success, they will need to actively work on developing their speaking and listening skills.

## Related Research Informing My Practice

Clifford, Amos. (2015). "Using Classroom Circles to Teach Restorative Practices: A Training Manual and Curriculum." *Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles*. Center for Restorative Process.

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

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

Mirra, Nicole. (2018). *Educating for Empathy: Literacy Learning and Civic Engagement*. Teachers College Press.

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."

## 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?

## 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've observed in themselves. As the classroom teacher, I adjust my practices to meet student interest and need.

## Reflection

From time to time, students talk and write about their experiences during these activities. As the classroom teacher, I reflect on what I observe and determine if there are any noticeable patterns.

## Student Voice & Choice

Building on communication skills is dependent of student voice. The discussions and activities I facilitate are shaped by student voice and what they choose to talk about.

## Sustained Inquiry

Students engage weekly in one or more activities that allow them to practice communication skills (active listening, productive conversation, debate, etc.).

## Authenticity

The communication activities are primarily focused on exploring questions and issues that connect to students' lives and identities. These activities also provide opportunity to build skills in line with speaking and listening common core standards.

## Considering 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 11<sup>th</sup> grade classes, there are several students who have experienced one or more adverse childhood experience. 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.