

## Details

*Tips for Fostering Academic Conversations with Jennifer Orr - 269*

*In this episode, fellow ASCD author and educator Jennifer Orr joins me for a deep dive into the art of fostering dynamic academic conversations with students across grade levels. You'll hear techniques from her book *Demystifying Discussion* that empower students to co-construct knowledge while using versatile digital tools to enrich collaborative and reflective practices, deepening classroom discussions.*

**Link to live show notes:** <https://classtechtips.com/2024/05/28/Academic-Conversations-269/>

\*Academic Conversations

## Introduction

Hello there, My name is Monica Burns and welcome to today's episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast! If you want to make the most of education technology aka EdTech, then you're in the right place. My goal is to help make EdTech easier and give you ideas you can try yourself, share with a colleague, or bookmark for later in the school year.

Every Tuesday on the podcast you'll hear stories from my time in the classroom, the work I do now with schools and districts, and my travels to different EdTech events. Get ready for solo episodes and interviews full of practical ideas and stories from new guests each month.

If we mention something you'd like to check out, click the link in the episode description or head to my website [classtechtips.com/podcast](https://classtechtips.com/podcast) for all of the show notes and resources from today's episode.

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## Today's Intro

This week's episode is titled: "Tips for Fostering Academic Conversations with Jennifer Orr." Jen is a fellow ASCD author, and we ran into each other at ASCD's annual conference in March. We caught up a bit in the hallway between sessions, which is one of my favorite things about conferences, and then I reached out to see if she would join us for a conversation about conversations. Jen has lots of great tips to share. Let's dive into the conversation!

## **Episode Transcript**

Monica Burns:

Welcome to the podcast. I am so excited to chat with you about academic conversations and demystifying discussion. But before we jump into all of that and some of the technology connections, would love to hear more about your role and education. What does your look like?

Jennifer Orr:

Well, this is my 26th year of elementary school classroom teaching. So I've taught grades from kindergarten through fifth grade currently with fourth graders. So I'm it's, it's as I've evolved in teaching over, you know, a quarter of a century, it's been interesting to see kind of how both sh education has shifted and how I have shifted Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. There are some things I don't need to think about anymore that are second nature this many years in leaving me free to do some other things that I wouldn't have been able to do before. But also as kind of the landscape and education has shifted I'm grateful to have years of experience to be able to spend some of my time every day supporting newer teachers. We have so many young or career switching young in their career. Yeah. Mm-Hmm.

Monica Burns:

<Affirmative>.

Jennifer Orr:

And so the more I can do to, to help them out, because I feel like the job has gotten harder and harder over those 25 years. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So I spend a lot of my time before school and during planning and meeting with some of these teachers or trying to put together things that they've asked about or working with them to observe me or observe them and, and then

debrief and talk. And so I think that's become a much bigger part of, of my role than I had anticipated.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And that mentor role Right. And hearing what people in all the different stages right, of their career are working on and what's happening in your classroom, you know, really leads us into today's conversation. Today we're talking about academic conversations and student discussions. Can you explain or, or help unpack that term academic conversations for us?

Jennifer Orr:

Absolutely. as, as I think of academic conversations and different people honestly may think of that term differently. For me it's about students talking with one another, whether that's just two students chatting, whether that's a small group or a whole class about their learning about the content and the skills that they're gaining. And so hopefully taking whatever conversation skills they have or conversation skills we're working on to really help them co-construct Mm-Hmm. New understanding and, and grow in their learning.

Monica Burns:

And I think that idea of growing together, right. Co-Constructing learning is something that we see when students have the time, which isn't always carved out Right. To talk, to, unpack Right. What they're learning and how do academic conversations look in different environments such as, you know, physical, we're all together in a classroom, digital, or connecting online, or even the elementary, and I don't wanna say verse the secondary, but maybe as opposed to <laugh> the secondary piece.

Jennifer Orr:

Absolutely. I, I honestly think it's not that different across the ages. Having done it with kindergartners through fifth graders, which there's a pretty wide range of difference between five year olds and, and 12 year olds. But even also having co-authored a another book with a high school English teacher Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> I'm astounded at the similarities. I mean, kids can discuss more sophisticated things honestly, as they get older, they may take things more personally than they do when they're younger, which I think makes it even harder in the secondary classroom. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, but they also have, have stronger skills to, to engage in conversations at that level. The, the in-person versus virtual was not something I had really thought much about before. C Yeah.

Monica Burns:

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>.

Jennifer Orr:

And then suddenly at the height of my passion around academic conversations, I was online with third graders. And the, the biggest challenge to me was, I think that one of the best, best parts about engaging in conversations in a classroom is that kids can turn and talk with one partner. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And that's such a, a powerful thing because every kid gets the chance to talk. Yeah. Every kid gets to hear someone else's ideas. They don't hear a lot of ideas, but everybody gets to engage in conversation. And in the virtual setting, sending everybody off to breakout rooms for a one minute conversation wasn't really <laugh>, it didn't have the same flow as it would have in person. But on the positive side, it was really interesting to see students who might not have said anything in a whole class conversation, put things in the chat

Monica Burns:

Yeah.

Jennifer Orr:

That back channel or that other option. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> of a way to participate in the conversation. And I've seen that I teach a an undergrad class on children's literature for \diverse populations. I've seen the exact same thing with undergrads. People who, and in the virtual setting maybe can't turn on their camera or mic or don't feel comfortable doing so. Yeah. Have a way to participate and to have their voice and ideas put out there, which is really an exciting thing. And I haven't quite figured out how to, just as I haven't figured out how to make the turn and talk with a partner work in the virtual setting, I haven't really figured out how to make that other channel work in, in-person setting. I

Monica Burns:

Think those are such great points when we think about, you know, both the elementary versus secondary, right. The younger kids are probably less likely to take something so personally <laugh>, right? One of one of their peers is giving them feedback in the same way it might stick, stick with a secondary student through the rest of the day. And that turn and talk,

right? Everyone can participate right. In a conversation is so valuable, right. Throughout the grade levels. But I really appreciate what you mentioned about, you know, as much as we might all have our breakout room stories, right? Of times when like, nobody would turn on their camera. And I'm thinking of this more from an adult professional learning standpoint, right? Or, you know, I often do webinars for groups that are after school, right? So some people are like on the move, right?

Monica Burns:

And with their best of intentions, it's not personal, right? It's just if they're gonna participate that's, you know, the best they can offer in that time period. But having those other options to jump into a chat to give a different kind of feedback, right. Or, you know, we can't spit out the link that goes with something we're talking about, but to be able to drop that link in <laugh> right, at the same time right. Is pretty, you know, it's pretty interesting to think about the pros and cons or just the, you know, the assets to being in all these, these different spaces. So, you know, one thing that I'm sure comes up in your conversations around what it means to bring this into a classroom setting is how do we assess or measure the quality and the impact of academic conversations?

Jennifer Orr:

I think that's always a question in education. You know, what is, what does this mean for how we understand what our students have learned and where they are on our on, on their growth journey. It's also by chance, one of the things I didn't realize I was gonna love so much about academic conversations, but what I have found over time is that I have a much better insight into their understanding from listening to conversations. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> than I do from a test or even from a paper. They turn into me with some problems in math or with, you know, a piece of writing. Because they're sharing their thinking in a way that often doesn't happen elsewhere. Yeah. so that's been huge. And there's a couple of things that that help me with that. Pardon me. One is I video record conversations sometimes. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, this is another shift in, in 26 years. I remember doing my national boards for the first time. Yeah.

Monica Burns:

Literally

Jennifer Orr:

Buy a video camera. Mm-Hmm.

Monica Burns:

Somebody <laugh>

Jennifer Orr:

<Laugh> the fact that I could just sit my phone on a little stand, oh my gosh, recorder and immediately hit record. And then I don't even have to pay attention to it. I can like walk around and listen to kids Mm-Hmm. Or I can Mm-Hmm. Kind of put in a question if I need to. 'cause I don't have to pay attention to the recording. But then I have that, that I can look at later. Now, I also know as I'm still a classroom teacher, that if I record a 15 minute conversation, then somewhere later I need to carve out 15 minutes to listen to it. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> and probably more than 15 minutes. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So I'm not gonna record every conversation that's just not sustainable. So I also do conversation maps. Yeah. Where I write down the names of the students kind of in the oval shape they're sitting in.

Jennifer Orr:

And I track draw lines from kid to kid as they speak. So I can track the conversation and make notes outside of that circle with a few things they're saying that I wanna remember. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. I might then flip the page over and note something that's like a surprising misconception where I think, oh, we really don't understand that idea today. I will nev the first time this really hit me was a conversation about how are, are rectangles and squares the same or different? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And I thought, oh my goodness, my kids have no understanding of the relationship between rectangles and squares <laugh>. Yeah. I totally did not know that from any other work we had done in the classroom. And suddenly I'm thinking, okay, I gotta change what I'm doing tomorrow in math so we can look at that. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>.

Jennifer Orr:

So having conversation maps is really helpful. I haven't yet found the right tech tool that I would really like. My 17-year-old just got a reMarkable, I'm thinking maybe. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, this is the potential. I'd like to be able to do that digitally Yeah. Where I could, because I honestly, this is a problem I have with paper. I lose the papers. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. I'd like to be able to have those records of that conversation map tracked over time. It's really helpful for me to see not just their academic

learning, but their conversation skills. Are they inviting other people into the conversation? Are they clearly really listening and building on each other's ideas? Are they genuinely using a conversation to co-construct understanding? So the more I can kind of see that over time, the better. So video recordings and conversation maps are, are really great assessment tools. I also sometimes just have kids after a classroom conversation, go write about it for a few minutes. Yeah. And then I can see what they got from it and not just assume what I think they got from it. This is more challenging with kindergartners and first graders <laugh>. Yeah.

Monica Burns:

Uhhuh

Jennifer Orr:

<Affirmative>. But by third or fourth they can write me a few sentences and help me understand what, what they learned from listening to their classmates.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And you know, even as you're talking about, you know, the kind of the two pieces there, like, I could imagine that a tool someone would use for sketch noting, or like a remarkable Right. Would work really well. I think there's times that it's great to have a stylus in your hand Right. For some more flexibility. Right. Especially if you're connecting those conversations in a conversation map. And for students who are, you know, at that younger, you know, the K one two level, I'm sure even, you know, doing the quick voice recording or a, you know, quick Flip video, like formally Flipgrid, I always feel like I need to say both <laugh> at the same time is a way for them to debrief. Right. Like, this is what I heard, this is what I learned. So I love that. And, you know, maybe that gets into this next question I wanted to ask you about, you know, what are the platforms or tools that you have found effective for facilitating academic conversations online? You mentioned some of the, the chats, right? Or the back channels, right. Is it possible to create a sense of community when students are, you know, actively participating or in online spaces?

Jennifer Orr:

The sense of community is such a big piece of conversations. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. Without that sense of community, you're not gonna get conversations that really have the power you want 'em to have. Kids are not gonna feel safe to engage in it in the way you want them to. I think in a synchronous online setting that the chat and the, and the microphones

are enough for me. But even in person, I think there's something to being able to pull out pieces of that conversation to come back to. When I went to teaching first graders after 10 years of teaching fourth and fifth graders Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, I kind of had a moment of panic where I thought they can't write <laugh> and read like they can't

Monica Burns:

<Laugh>. Right.

Jennifer Orr:

I had 10, fourth and fifth graders who were making wikis as we went through the year to come back to for this big end of year project. So we were kind of gathering our thinking all year and thought first graders can't do this. And voice thread, you know, this has been 15 years. Yeah. Right. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> voice thread was a gift for me. Yeah. Because it did the same kind of thing with kids who couldn't yet do that in text. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> Flip has done some of the same ideas. Yeah. So after a conversation, I might have kids make a Flip instead of writing, and then I can go through those and pull out the two or three that have some really meaty ideas and put them in our Schoology classroom and have kids respond to them. Like keep that conversation building over time outside of our classroom space or outside of, I mean, they may be doing it in the classroom, but we're, we're not all gathered in person together. So being able to take that technology to pull ideas out that I think, oh, there's more they can build on with this. They're gonna talk more about this piece of that book, or they're gonna talk more about this math strategy that they weren't really getting yet, but this kid explained it well and if they keep building on it. So Flip or VoiceThread or any of those kinds of tools that allow kids to record themselves have been really useful for that.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And you know, as we're, we're thinking here too, almost like, you know, you mentioning VoiceThread is fun, right? Like one that was really gaining a lot of popularity in the past right. Isn't something that isn't, you know, an everyday practice right now. Maybe there's an alternative tool right. That someone's using. Right. Do you have like a wishlist, right? Is there, you know, in what ways do you think technology could, you know, further evolve to better support academic conversations? Whether it's something that kids are doing face-to-face or online?

Jennifer Orr:



That's such a great question. <Laugh>. I think at this point, I feel like what has happened a lot in technology is that we have really phenomenal tools to do the kinds of things that we wanna do with kids that adults are using. You know, the kinds of tools that you use to podcast. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, I want my kids to be able to do some of that same kind of thing. But those tools are not, they take more time to learn than I can commit to. Yeah. I have my, my students right now are recording into Audacity to make really short little podcasts about their research on Colonial America.

Monica Burns:

Love it.

Jennifer Orr:

But I'm having to do far more of that work than I would like. Yeah. Because I haven't found the time to invest in helping them learn how to do it. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, I'd love to have more simp, like more simplified versions of some of these tools that aren't that, that don't lose the power. And that may be a ridiculous thing to ask for, but I would love to be able to have my fourth graders engage in some conversations about their research or about a book we're reading in the way of like a three minute podcast without needing to spend days helping them learn how to use a tool. Yeah. Mm-Hmm.

Monica Burns:

<Affirmative>. Yeah. And I think this particularly right at the level that you teach, but you know, this scales all the way up, right? Like, the more that we can use something that is open-ended that provides enough options, right. For students that you can revisit a couple times over the year or the buttons, right. Or, or big enough for everyone to find them, right. Or, you know, or have that level of ease so that there is, you know, some independence. I think that's, that's a good kind of wishlist item, right? When you're, you're looking for something to bring into, to a group. So, you know, can you tell us more about your book *Demystifying Discussion*? What, what will people find when they open this up?

Jennifer Orr:

I hope what they'll find is kind of a guide to engaging kids in academic conversations. I've come to realize, and part of this came out of conversations with my co-author of the second book, who, again, high school English teacher, we've come to realize that talk is in all of the standards from kindergarten through 12th grade. Oral language is a piece of standards

everywhere. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And yet to the best of what we can figure out, no one's ever taught how to do it. Yeah. There's no courses that address this in undergrad. There's not even a whole lot of PD around it. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And so somehow it's just have your kids talk <laugh> and that should, you know, we assume that's good enough and kids are talking all the time, right. So I think there's a sense of, you know, if they talk, that's great, but I think there's a lot more, and, and, and lemme take a step back.

Jennifer Orr:

And having them talk in general is powerful. Yeah. Hattie had in Hattie's research, just classroom conversations have a really big payoff. Yeah. I think, and I'm, I'm gonna make sure, you know, this is my thought and not anything I can fully back up yet. I think that's just having kids talk to each other. Whereas if you really help kids develop their skills, their skills at listening to one another, their skills at asking questions of each other, to build new ideas, their skills of adding on their idea to someone else's, their skills at kind of paraphrasing and synthesizing these are all things that I talk about in the book and how to help kids learn to do them better. I think then we will see classroom conversations having an even bigger payoff for kids than just saying, Hey, talk to somebody about this <laugh>. Yeah.

Monica Burns:

I love that because I do think for, you know, someone who might be asking kids right, too, do that turn and talk. Right? Having that level of intention, understanding what the goals are understanding the research behind it is so, is so crucial. So for someone who's on the go today, right? Of course I'll link out to all the things right, that we're talking about. So they can find your book, they can find you on social and all that. But where can people connect with you? Where can they learn more about your work?

Jennifer Orr:

Well, the book is obviously a good place to start. Mm-Hmm. The second book is from Stem House. So the Stem House. Mm-Hmm. Site has a book called *We're Gonna Keep on Talking About Engaging in Conversations About Race With Elementary Children*. My website is really easy. It's J-E-N-O-R-R.com. I am on Twitter @JenOrr, but not much anymore these days. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. But Blue ky, I'm trying, hoping BlueSky is gonna take off. So I'm there as @JenOrr as well.

Monica Burns:

Awesome. Well, we'll link out Yeah. To everything for people to be able to find and to connect with you. Jen, this was so wonderful. Really appreciate you joining the podcast today.

Jennifer Orr:

Thank you. Thank you, Monica. I've really had a good time.

### **So let's make this EdTech easy with some key points from the episode...**

Give students time to talk.

Discussions look similar and different in primary and secondary classrooms.

Think about your intention for classroom conversations.

Leverage digital tools for reflection.

Remember, you can find the shownotes and the full list of resources from this episode including all of the ways to connect with Jennifer Orr on [classtechtips.com/podcast](https://classtechtips.com/podcast) and finding today's episode #269!

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### **Outro**

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sentence review. And if you have an idea for an upcoming episode, find me on Instagram @ClassTechTips and send me a DM with your ideas, questions, or just to say hello!

## Episode Resources

- Check out Jennifer Orr's [website](#) & [ASCD profile](#)
- Connect with Jennifer Orr on [Twitter/X](#) & [Bluesky](#)
- Find Jennifer's books:  
*We're Gonna Keep On Talking* on [Routledge](#) & [Amazon](#)  
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