

Students as Drivers of the Bus; Teachers as Driving Instructors

Mindset 3: Shifting the Role of the Student and the Teacher

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During my first year as a principal at Sage Canyon School, I intentionally spent a lot of time listening and noticing. Noticing people; noticing culture; noticing strengths and practices that I wanted to amplify. By the end of the year, I knew that what I wanted to amplify was student-to-student interactions. Based on everything I had read and learned through my learning around *Creating Cultures of Thinking* and having had the opportunity to attend a summer Project Zero Classroom institute, I knew that student talk has a significant impact on learning and enables students to take responsibility for their own learning. By providing opportunities for meaningful dialogue where students consistently explain and justify their thinking, we develop students' capacity for self-direction and encourage deep learning. This, I thought, is exactly what we should amplify!

In his books, Ron Ritchhart explains that when teachers take on the role of the listener, they shift the ownership of learning to the students. Dr. Ritchhart also states that, "... when teachers listen, they model dialogue, collaboration, creativity, and compassion." In addition, when teachers really listen to their students, students feel heard, cared for, and valued as individuals. The role of teachers then becomes that of asking thought-provoking, interesting questions that generate discussion and discourse. As I considered which mindset best aligns with the site focus around student dialogue, I landed on Mindset 3: Shifting the Role of the Student and Teacher. I couldn't help but be continuously reminded of the research-based truth: the ones doing the talking are the ones doing the learning. So, the path for our site focus was decided: we were going to move toward more student talk and more teacher listening as a vehicle for shifting the role of the teacher and the student.

Together with the Culture of Thinking Fellows group, we explored impacts and possibilities for shifting the role of the student and teacher. We considered implications, actions, the implied changes, and the path for moving forward in a meaningful, connected way. Through in-depth discussions and thinking routines, we made sense of the mindset as well as the components and considerations involved with the mindset. The process helped me to do some unpacking of the mindset and brainstorm action steps to implement.

To ensure that we developed a shared understanding around dialogue, I led our staff through a thinking routine to articulate what the term "dialogue" is and what it isn't. I wanted us to consider the "prerequisite skills" and conditions necessary to create opportunities for meaningful dialogue among students. As the year progressed, I highlighted pictures with captions of dialogue in action in my weekly newsletters to staff. This was one way of celebrating our collective learning. It also allowed us all to have a "window in" to the ways students engaged with one another and provided ideas for how different teachers created opportunities for authentic student-to-student interactions to occur.

As a staff, we collected and analyzed Street Data to consider what it might tell us about our current state in terms of student interactions and classroom culture. I asked grade level teams to plan an action step based on their noticings from the analysis of student dialogue from the Street Data. We also continued our collective learning by analyzing teacher moves from one of the sample videos on the Cultures of Thinking website to identify the multitude of ways that the teacher supported student-to-student dialogue through her systems, structures, and lesson preparation. Another resource we explored was the Dialogue Toolkit from Project Zero. Teams then decided on one “dialogue move” or tool to implement with the intention of extending or deepening student-to-student dialogue in an upcoming unit of learning. After implementation, each team shared what they implemented, why they chose that specific tool or strategy to implement, and what they noticed about their students as a result of implementing their plan.

I was thrilled to learn from the teams as they shared their process and observations. From documenting conversations over time to students providing feedback for each other, or the implementation of structures to support leaderless discussions, the teachers and the students had all clearly embraced the new opportunities. It was incredible to hear the shifts of student and teacher roles that naturally began to happen as teachers intentionally planned opportunities for real, rich dialogue among students. We all noticed that these dialogue opportunities led to teachers taking on the role of a listener, facilitator, or orchestrator. We noticed that student engagement increased, and they took more ownership of their learning. Students began to manage themselves and to hold their classmates accountable during their conversations because what they were discussing was meaningful and supported their individual and collective learning. As a reflection of our learning journey at the end of the year, our staff had an opportunity to notice and articulate a progression of dialogue from kindergarten to sixth grade. We again deepened our understanding by noticing and naming the skills our students had developed, describing new ways for teachers to facilitate opportunities for age-appropriate student dialogue, and noticing how the culture in the classrooms had shifted over time.

At this point in my learning, some of my takeaways are that to shift the role of the student and the teacher is a long process and there are many factors that contribute to the roles of the student and the teacher as well as shifting these roles. I recognize that our own experiences of learning influence our practices and the systems we build; I also recognize the tension between feeling the need to direct the learning and wanting to promote agency for learners.

I am excited to build on our progress and continue this learning journey. Next year, I plan to lead our staff in constructing our collective vision of shifting the role of the student and teacher. I want us to consider other contributing factors that play a role in this shift. As I consider the interconnectedness of the mindsets, I see many connections between shifting the student and teacher roles and the notion that learning occurs at the point of challenge. When the task is challenging, students naturally ask questions, explain their thinking, and engage in meaning-making through conversation. I am eager to explore how the design of challenging tasks can support student dialogue, continue to shift the student and teacher roles, and ultimately, support meaningful and deep learning for students. This next focus has me thinking about how we create conditions where students “drive the bus,” or own their learning, and teachers “are the driving instructors” who guide and help students navigate the situations and surprises that come along the road of their learning journey.