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Chavez, Rosa D.	Stanford University	
Munson, Jen	Stanford University	
Langer-Osuna, Jennifer M.	Stanford University	
Lange, Kimiko E.	Stanford University	

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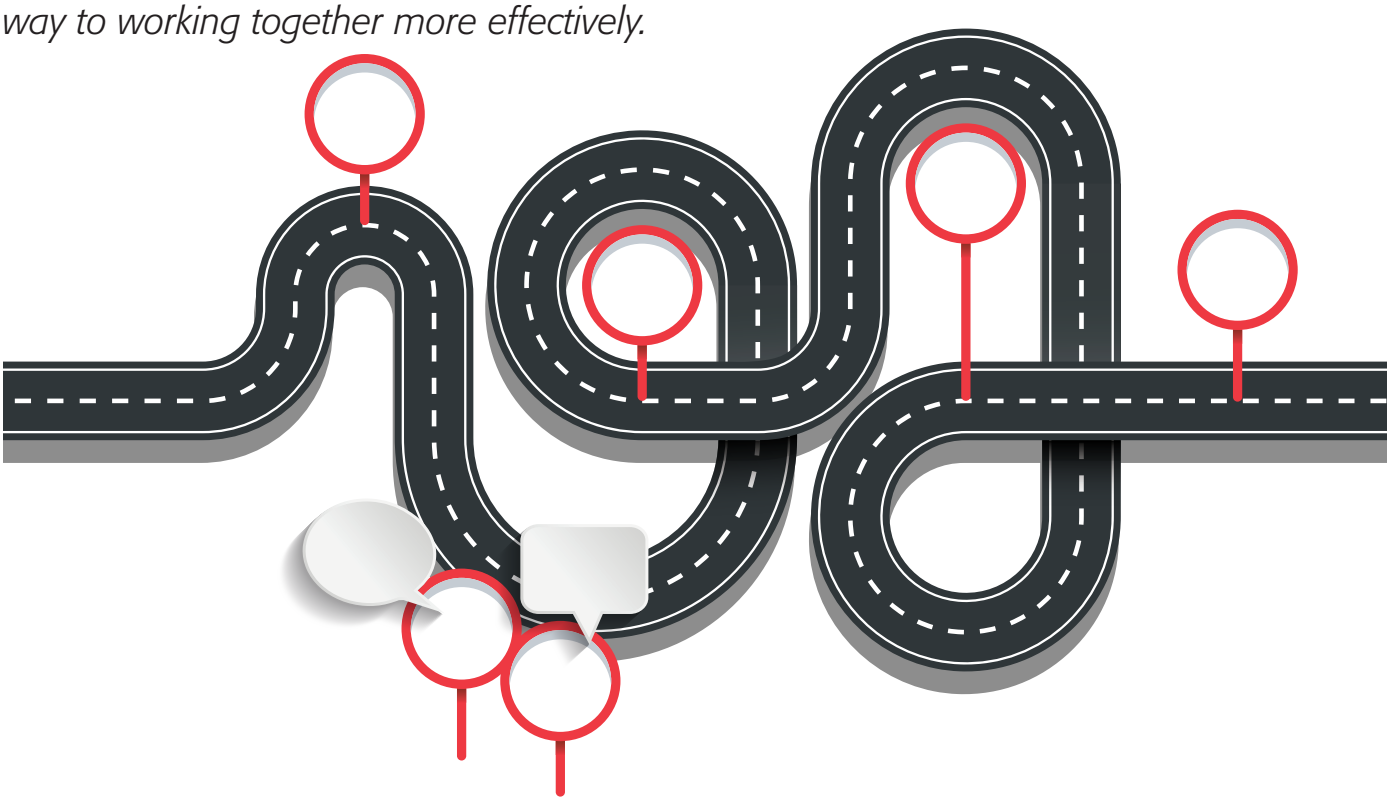
Can off-task be on-track?

When students are working together, some off-task conversations actually smooth the way to working together more effectively.



By **Emma C. Gargroetzi, Rosa D. Chavez, Jen Munson, Jennifer M. Langer-Osuna, and Kimiko E. Lange**

Jane moves around her 4th-grade classroom, observing as her students work together to solve math problems involving place value. Math manipulatives scatter across tables, and student voices surround her. Much of what she overhears is clearly productive, on-task conversation: "How many more do you need?" "I've got six sticks of 10. I made 60!" But Jane also hears the strains of off-task talk. References to Minecraft and a recent movie and even some singing. What are they up to? Jane wonders. What should she do?

Learning is a social activity, and disciplinary collaboration requires a lot of talk (e.g., Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). This creates a challenge for teachers who worry about keeping students focused on the task at hand when they cannot provide direct attention to what all the students are doing. Because the professional literature emphasizes the importance of time on task (Milner et al., 2018), teachers assume that off-task talk is wasting time and detracting from learning. But is that always true? What *are* students doing when they appear off task? As it turns out, some research suggests that off-task talk can support collaboration by alleviating boredom (Baker et al., 2010), supporting emotional regulation (Sabourin et al., 2011), negotiating status within the group (Sullivan & Wilson, 2015), or extending work in new directions (Dyson, 1987).

EMMA C. GARGROETZI (egroetzi@stanford.edu) and **ROSA D. CHAVEZ** (rdchavez@stanford.edu) are doctoral candidates at Stanford University, Palo Alto, Calif. **JEN MUNSON** (jmunson@northwestern.edu) is an assistant professor in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., and the author of *In the Moment: Conferring in the Elementary Math Classroom* (Heinemann, 2018). **JENNIFER M. LANGER-OSUNA** (jmlo@standford.edu) is an assistant professor and **KIMIKO E. LANGE** (kimikol@stanford.edu) is a doctoral student at Stanford University, Palo Alto,, Calif.

Illustration: Getty Images

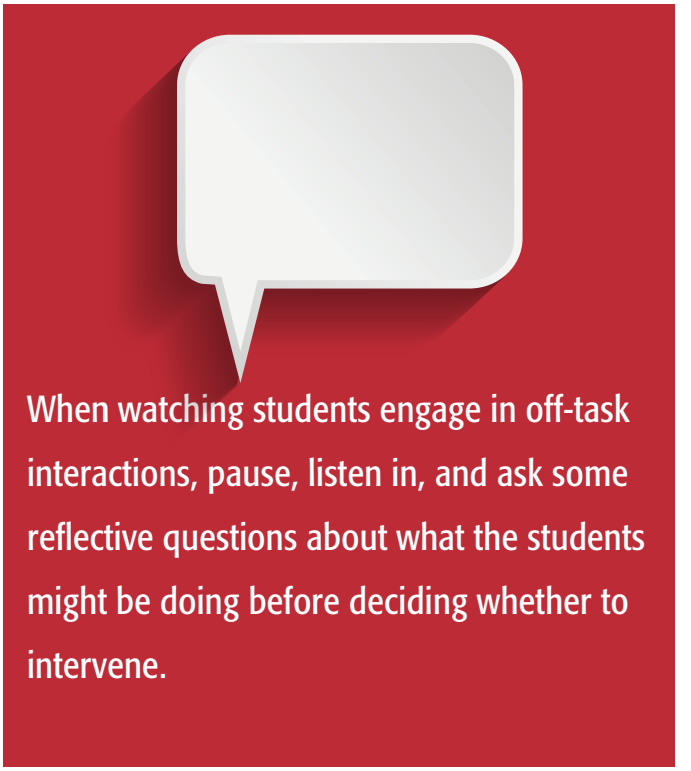
Our own research study of a 4th-grade classroom (Langer-Osuna et al., 2018) offers examples of student interactions during collaborative mathematics problem-solving sessions. As students worked to deepen their understandings of place value in a simulation involving different ways to package T-shirts (Fosnot, 2007), their off-task talk helped them collaborate more effectively. These examples form the basis of a framework for observing, interpreting, and making decisions about whether to intervene in off-task interactions. While our study was conducted in the context of elementary mathematics, we believe the implications extend to collaborative learning across disciplines and grades.

What off-task interactions can do

While many assume that off-task talk is always unproductive, our study revealed that students used off-task talk predominately for *productive* purposes. In fact, more than half of all instances of off-task interactions involved students attempting to get themselves and others into collaboration, after which the talk tended to shift into disciplinary activity. In only one out of every five instances did students use off-task interactions to avoid work. In one out of six instances, students used off-task interactions to fill time, after perceiving themselves to have completed the task.

Students used off-task talk to negotiate access to the collaboration in five key ways (see Table 1). In some cases, off-task talk occurred after students attempted to include themselves in the group by expressing an idea, asking a question, or making a request that did not receive a response; that is, off-task talk got the other students to pay attention to them. Students also used off-task talk to gain peers' attention when they were working in parallel, without interacting. Such efforts were predominately successful, allowing students who did not have access to materials, conversation, or decision making to become part of the group's work and bringing students together around a shared task. Students also used off-task interactions to draw their peers into collaboration. Furthermore, when students attempted to position one group member — themselves or a peer — as more powerful than the others, off-task talk was sometimes used to deflect these efforts and maintain more equitable relationships. These interactions were often fleeting, tending to last under a minute.

To illuminate how off-task talk can be productive, we share four vignettes showing how students used off-task talk to support collaboration in ways that on-task talk did not. The first two examples show talk that was completely off task, while the other two show talk that was related to the task but that strayed from the core disciplinary work.



When watching students engage in off-task interactions, pause, listen in, and ask some reflective questions about what the students might be doing before deciding whether to intervene.

TABLE 1.
How off-task talk supported student access to collaboration

Function	Definition
Warm-up to collaboration	Off-task interactions that mark the beginning of the collaborative activity and support initial connection with peers so that students can begin work as a group.
Gain access to collaboration for self	Off-task interactions that enable a student who was previously not participating in the collaboration to enter and begin work with the group.
Recruit others to the collaboration	Off-task interactions that bring one or more students who were previously not participating into the joint work.
Gain the attention of others	Off-task interactions that get peers to look at or turn toward the speaker and give the speaker the opportunity to engage in conversation.
Resist domination	Off-task interactions that serve to ignore or deflect efforts by a peer to position one group member as more powerful than the rest.

Negotiating access

Productive disciplinary collaboration requires that all students participate, something easier said than done. We found that students often turned to off-task talk as a way to bring themselves or others into the collaborative work.

Vignette 1: From your tree to my number. Mutya, Felix, and Jose were supposed to be working together to represent numbers as combinations of tens and ones using linking cubes. Jose was often left out in interactions with his peers, and on this day, he tried unsuccessfully to gain access to the materials and collaborate with his partners. Mutya had pulled all the loose cubes toward her, and Jose, with no access to the materials, leaned in toward Felix to grab his attention:

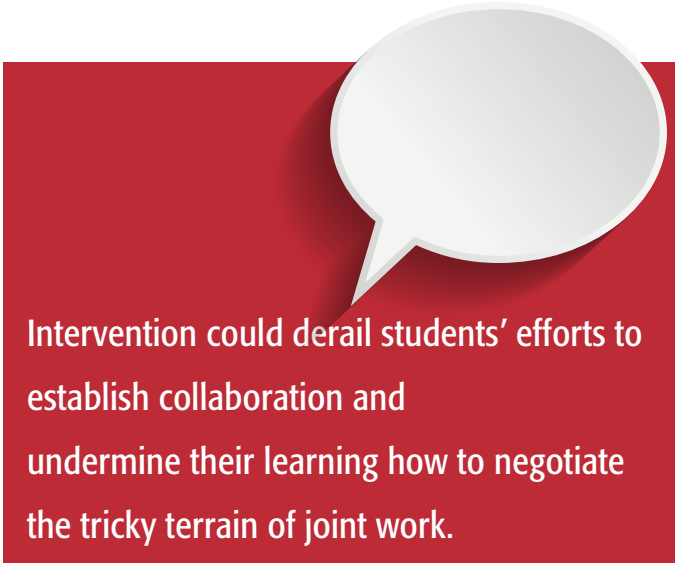
JOSE: Felix.
FELIX: [*turns to Jose holding a green and red stick of 10 cubes*] Want to fight me?
JOSE : No, you Christmas tree.
FELIX: [*puts down green and red stick, picks up black and red stick*] Want to fight me now?

Jose then engaged Felix in play fighting and broke Felix's ten stick with a ten stick that he picked up. Their activity gained the attention of Mutya, who told them to stop playing around. Through play fighting with Felix, Jose gained access to the cubes and the attention of both his peers. He used this attention to suggest that the group start the work by building his number: "Why don't we make mine first cause it's like the shortest?" Once Jose gained access, he quickly shifted the topic of conversation back to the academic task.

Vignette 2: From burning down the village to making tens together. Gabe and his partner Katy were working together to model numbers with cubes, while seated at a table with two other students who worked independently. When Gabe suggested that the table group work together, both Katy and one of his tablemates, Lina, expressed reluctance.

GABE: I thought we were working with you guys, too.
KATY: They're working together.
GABE: Are you guys working together?
LINA: Yeah.

When this attempt to recruit others into the collaboration was rejected, Gabe began talking about the computer game Minecraft. One minute into the Minecraft conversation, Gabe exclaimed triumphantly, "I was the first one to burn down the village! Woohoo!" This exclamation caught his tablemates' full attention, and Gabe used the moment to pick up the basket of cubes and direct his tablemates to "Put all your tens in here, all your tens in here!" Katy, Lina, and Gabe, now oriented to each other, began building tens with the cubes and counting aloud in unison. Through his off-task talk about being a powerful Minecraft character, Gabe established attention and influence among his peers that allowed him to grow the collaboration, adding Lina to it, and then shift the conversation back to the academic work.



Taking ownership

Sometimes students seem to get carried away with the details of a task, but this seemingly off-task talk can be an important part of their learning. As students work out these details, they also may be negotiating their shared ownership of the work, considering whose ideas or contributions will be represented in a solution or what role each group member will play. Although they appear to be going off task, they are getting work done.

Vignette 3: Negotiating sticks of ten. Diana, Felix, and Carlos were working to model the number 57. After each built a few sticks of ten and pushed them into the middle, they found they had seven tens when they only needed five. Carlos removed two and announced, "There. We're done." But the other students expressed concern whether each group member's contribution was represented in their solution.

DIANA: Which one's yours?
CARLOS: Mine are these two.
FELIX: Mine is this one.
CARLOS: No wait, mine is this one.
DIANA: Actually, take this one, because his also needs to be in here.

Although this interaction could easily be dismissed as superfluous chatter after the task is done, these students were continuing the work of collaboration by ensuring that each group member's work was part of the solution.

Vignette 4: Negotiating sizes. Four students had just begun work processing T-shirt orders as part of a simulation, when a conversation erupted about who was responsible for counting and packaging T-shirts of different sizes. What began as simple role distribution transformed into something more fraught when some students suggested that the sizes should match the people responsible for them. Kiara, who was labeled small, and Jose, labeled extra-large, both protested:

JOSE: I wanna be large.
JESSICA: I'm medium.
KIARA: No, I wanna be a medium cause my shirt's a medium.
JOSE: No . . . you look . . . small.
JESSICA: Yeah. . . . Oh wait! You're extra-large, you're large, I'm medium, you're small [*points to each person in the group in order of physical size*].
JOSE: Actually, I'm medium . . .
KIARA: [*pulls arms into shirt, turns shirt around to look at tag*] I'm an extra-extra-large! Look!

After settling on roles, students began doing the counting and modeling required by the task. However, the talk about sizes was important work for these four because it enabled them to take ownership of the academic task as they worked together to sort out how they would handle the potential social consequences of choosing roles based on body size.

Listening to off-task interactions: When to intervene?

The examples above represent moments when many teachers would intervene to get students back on task. But doing so would ignore the productive functions that these interactions served in supporting students' collaborative work. In fact, intervention could derail students' efforts to establish collaboration and undermine their learning how to negotiate the tricky terrain of joint work.

On the other hand, intervention is sometimes necessary. When students are avoiding work or perceive themselves to be finished with work, intervention makes sense. Students must understand the task and have meaningful work to do. So, how do you know when to intervene and when to allow students to navigate their own way? Intervention makes sense when:

- A student is being excluded, and their attempts to enter are consistently shut down.
- Off-task talk goes on for more than a minute, without attempts to get back into work.
- Students need guidance on how to collaborate.

Productive teacher interventions address the issue behind the off-task talk. For instance, teachers might explain what it looks and sounds like to collaborate and support students in getting started. Teachers could also ask about the status of the group's work to determine if they need additional work or a new direction.

But just as there is value in struggling with disciplinary ideas, there is value in struggling with learning how to collaborate. Intervention may not be advised if:

- Off-task talk is fleeting.
- After off-task moments, students get into collaborative work.
- Students are attending to some part of the academic task while their talk is off task.
- Students are trying to attract others into the academic work.
- Students who are marginalized are getting others' attention through off-task talk.

In these moments, observing to see how the talk develops makes more sense than intervening, which runs the

"Timmy, thank you for your science report . . . 'Yawning is contagious.'"

While many assume that off-task talk is unilaterally unproductive, our study revealed that students used off-task talk predominately for productive purposes.

risk of disrupting the collaboration that students are learning how to achieve. When watching students engage in off-task interactions, pause, listen in, and ask some reflective questions about what the students might be doing before deciding whether to intervene (see Table 2).

Learning to collaborate, collaborating to learn

Collaborative learning requires that we reimagine not just what disciplinary engagement can be, but also what productive discourse can sound like. Each time students collaborate, they are grappling with disciplinary ideas and practices, as well as the social world. These dual goals make collaboration a powerful platform for teaching and learning.

Adult professional discourse often involves a similar dynamic, with teacher talk moving between planning, discussing instructional ideas, and checking in about each other's families or weekends. Weaving in and out of professional and personal talk can knit a group together, promote stamina during difficult tasks, and actively include all members. Off-task talk can be a valuable component of collaboration, and eliminating it should not be our goal. Rather, teachers must discern the function of off-task talk and allow students to struggle toward productivity together.

TABLE 2.
Questions to ask when listening to off-task talk

Ask yourself:	Look and listen for:
Are students trying to get into the collaboration?	• Where the materials are located. Are they central, or bunched by one student? • How students' bodies are positioned. Are they facing one another, or is someone getting the cold shoulder? • Calling one another's names. Are they trying to get each other's attention?
Could students be taking ownership of the task?	• Negotiating whose materials get used. Are students trying to include everyone's work? • Negotiating roles. Are students trying to figure out what role each person can play?
Do students believe that they are finished?	• No attempts to get back to work, especially at the latter part of the work period. Is the off-task talk sustained? • Declarations of being finished. Are they saying they are done, or asking if there is anything else to do?

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