Captivating Today's Students in Academic Discourse and Writing:

Words, Questions, Reading, and Engaging Activities Matter!

By Kelley Dockray

Kelley Dockray is the founder of KD Academic Consulting, an educational consulting agency in the greater Houston area, specializing in coaching educational leaders. Prior to consulting, she was a secondary dean of instruction, instructional coach, and English educator. Her research interests include building connections with students who have experienced trauma, coaching educational leaders, and building a love for literacy in the classroom. She can be reached at kdockray5@gmail.com and on Twitter via @kdacademics.

Abstract: This article emphasizes the power of the words we use as educators by shining a light on the work of Peter. H. Johnston. The author offers timely and pertinent ways to engage students in effective and respectful academic discourse and writing. She also stresses the importance of modeling for students and letting them see our struggle with writing. Meant to spark student immersion in reading, writing, and discourse, an abundance of quality question stems from experts in our field are offered. Additionally, the author provides her top five instructional strategies that set up students for success with academic discourse.

Keywords: conflicting viewpoints, engagement, fostering academic discourse, academic writing, quality questioning

Nancy Motley quotes Jay Cross in *Talk Read Talk Write* (2013, p. 19):

"Conversation is the most powerful learning technology ever invented."

Today, students (and educators!) are using social media and other technologies to communicate daily/hourly, and it is more important than ever to build our students' skills in this "most powerful learning technology": conversation! So, how do we get today's instant gratification students truly engaged in professional discussions and academic writing? What ideas can we lean into from the experts in our field? When it comes to engrossing students in the successful use of academic language, our words matter, quality questions matter, reading matters, and engaging ideas matter. Let's take a further look into these four components.

It Starts With Us: Our Words Matter

In *Opening Minds* (2012), Peter H. Johnston states that:

> our language choices have serious consequences for children's learning and for who they become as individuals and as a community…the language we choose in our teaching changes the worlds children inhabit now and those they will build in the future. Make no mistake, when we are teaching for today, we are teaching into tomorrow. (p.7)

Johnston's books *Choice Words* and *Opening Minds* taught me early in my educational leadership career to consider every word we say to our students and the impact these words will have on America's future, as if our words lead to success or failure, kindness or evil, or even life or death. The words we choose and our planning decisions risk placing students in what Carol Jago calls the ZMD, or Zone of Minimal Development, as opposed to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Jago, 2004).

Our students' academic language skills depend upon our own academic language skills, and these come to light as we model in front of our students each day. We must model, model, model how

to communicate effectively and respectfully in our own writing, our discourse, and our body language and facial expressions.

Furthermore, in *Choice Words* Johnston quotes Courtney Cazden (2001): "Few classrooms in the United States entertain or encourage conflicting viewpoints" (Johnston, 2004, p. 69). In a world with "Facebook Fights," cruel social media posts, the unneighborly Nextdoor app, and political attacks, we must take it one step further. We must not only provide students with repeated practice and opportunities to discuss conflicting viewpoints, but we must also model how to do so professionally and respectfully to set them up for success in the classroom and on social media. We live in a divisive world—now more than ever before—where we do not embrace people with differing viewpoints than our own, where we cannot befriend people from different backgrounds. Frankly, sometimes we can't even be in the same room as "them" and I'm not just talking about family dinner on Thanksgiving Day! To foster professional and respectful discourse, I have found that the strategies offered in Figure 1 promote and strengthen academic discourse. As educators, we have the power to improve this world we live in for the better. We can create opportunities that foster an acceptance of differing viewpoints, different personalities, different people with our own words and by teaching students to use words that can create positive change in our world. It starts with us.

- *Talk Read Talk Write* (Motley, 2013)
- Philosophical Chairs
- Think/Write/Read – Pair – Share
- Socratic Seminar
- Read/Write and Say Something (Short & Harste, 1996)

Figure 1. My Top 5 Favorite Tried & True Instructional Strategies to Foster Academic Discourse

Questions Matter

In addition to the words we choose, another way we can foster student discourse and academic writing is in the questions we pose. How strategically do you plan out the questions you ask your students daily? Do you write these questions out for yourself, for your students? Questions matter. Johnston poses two questions for consideration in *Opening Minds*:

> A. The three main reasons for the Civil War were . . .?
>
> B. From the perspective of the white male living in the twentieth century, the main reasons for the Civil War were . . .?
>
> Question A will not lead to an engaging conversation; it makes clear with the word *the* that there is a correct answer and that our answer will be judged. Question B is quite different. It is much more likely to lead to an engaging conversation and some learning . . . there will be multiple perspectives. (Johnston, 2012, p. 51)

Our questions need to be thoughtful, as they can lead to extremely varied learning outcomes.

Additionally, we should not be the only people in the room asking the questions. Do we allow students to bring the questions? Do we show students that we value their ideas? Have we yet moved from being the sage-on-the-stage to the facilitator of the learning process? In *Choice Words*, Johnston (2004) stresses, "We cannot persistently ask questions of children without becoming one-who-asks-questions and placing children in the position of the one-who-answers-questions. . . . We position ourselves as the giver of knowledge" (pp. 6, 9).

It is time we hand over the learning to students. This includes whole-group and small-group discussions. After you pose a question as the group facilitator, leave the group for a time, and allow students

to continue the discussion without your involvement. Better yet, have a student be the facilitator. Require students to come to the discussion with questions prepared. Instill protocols/norms that ensure all students have the opportunity to participate. Better yet, have students create the protocols themselves.

Again, the words we use and the questions we pose in the classroom matter. We must pay close attention and ensure we do not place our students back in that ZMD. Figure 2 provides question stems to support the engagement of students in academic thinking, discussion, reading, and writing.

Reading Matters

In *Classics in the Classroom* (2004), Carol Jago wrote: "Students who read below grade level and English language learners need to read more, not less, than their peers in honors classes" (p. 4). They

WRITING STEMS…

Why?

How?

What if…?

Suppose…

How have you changed as a writer?

Did anyone try…

- New/difficult words this time?
- A different kind of writing this time?

What do you think you need to work on next?

What are you doing as a writer today?

How are you planning to go about this? Did your plan help you?

Where are you going with this piece of writing?

That's exactly what writers do.

How else could you do that?

You really have me interested in this character because of the things he/she says. Now, show me *how* he/she says them and what he/she looks like.

If you were to add info/dialogue about that character, where would you put it?

The character you created is like _____ in the other story we read.

Why/How did you/the author choose to do that or choose to use that word?

What other word(s) could you have used?

Is there anything you might do differently?

What else do you think the audience would like to know?

Let's break a rule!

I'm going to challenge you to take a risk as a writer by trying out _____ (author)'s way of _____.

What would you like to learn next as a writer?

BUILDING INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-CONFIDENCE

I like the way you figured that out.

You really are quite a poet/writer/reader/artist/etc.

You know what I heard you doing just now? You just…

What went well? What questions were raised?

That's not like you.

I bet you're proud of yourself.

How does that make you feel?

How does it make you feel to write a piece like that?

READING (as a writer) STEMS…

Write down a line you wish you had written.

What kind of text is this?

How is this different from _____(another genre/text)?

What are you noticing?

Any surprises?

Something didn't make sense for you? What can you do?

That's exactly what readers do.

What have you learned most recently as a reader?

Why did the author choose to do that or choose that word?

What other word(s) could the author have used?

What else could the author have done/used?

What is the author not telling us?

That's like…

What else do I know that is like this?

How else could the author do that?

What would you like to learn next as a reader?

How do you think the character feels about that?

What did the author intend? Why?

I wonder…/Maybe…/Seems like…/Perhaps…

Wow!

Oh, interesting…

OTHER/ALL ACTIVITIES

What problems did you encounter today?

How can/did you solve it? Anyone else? How else could we solve it?

How did you figure that out? How did you know?

Which part are you (not) sure about?

I'll check back with you in a few minutes.

Any compliments?

How could we check that? How could we be sure? What makes you think that?

Would you agree with that?

Is that an observation or a conjecture?

You figured that out with each other's help. How did you do that?

Anyone else had that sort of feeling/experience?

Any other ways to think about that? Any other opinions?

What are you thinking?

Figure 2. QUESTION STEMS From *Choice Words* (Johnston, 2004)

also need to converse and write "more, not less, than their peers in honors classes." We cannot underestimate the power reading has on building academic writing and conversation skills. In *180 Days*, Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle (2018) quote Frank Smith, the author of *Reading Without Nonsense* (2006, p. 118):

> All the nuts and bolts of writing—including spelling, punctuation, and grammar, but more importantly the subtle style and structure of written discourse, the appropriate organization of sentences and paragraphs, and the appropriate selection of words and tones of voice—are learned through reading. The point deserves emphasis. ***You learn to read by reading and you learn to write by reading.*** (p. 80)

I highly recommend *180 Days*, as it provides a plethora of ways to engage students in reading, which will in turn boost their academic language skills in discourse and writing.

Engaging Activities Matter

Living in the age of instant gratification, how do we attract our tech savvy students into academic discourse and writing? We embrace the technological times of today. We employ activities that engage the students we have sitting in front of us right now. We make it fun. Topics matter, the books we choose matter, the writing assignments matter, choice matters. Figure 3 offers several incredible ideas that have persuaded the most uninterested students to engage in the learning process.

- Use relevant visuals to inspire discussion and writing. Here are some excellent resources:
  - *The New York Times* Writing Prompts
  - Then vs. Now photography from www.theguardian.com. I highly recommend using their Civil War photos.
  - *History's Greatest Images* by Time
  - Images from our world today
- Use Georgia Heard's *Heart Maps* as a guide for students to create their own.
- Have students caption memes.
- Use inspiring mentor sentences and texts.
- Motivate with texts that matter to students in today's time!
- Provide students with an audience. This could be as simple as the classroom next door, parents, other teachers, etc.
- Utilize contentious quotes, video clips, and political advertisements.
- Invite students to select stimulating articles to spark class/group discussions (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018).
- Have students read, discuss, and then write their own "Six-Word Memoirs."
- Provide multiple opportunities for students to publish and enter writing contests.
- Have students write a tweet, summarizing a text, their day/life, etc.

Figure 3. Ideas for Engaging Students in Academic Discourse and Writing

It is also important for students to use and see their academic vocabulary words. Post them in the classroom and encourage use of weekly/unit academic vocabulary words during discourse and in student writing. Repeatedly state reminders before, during, and after discourse/writing activities. For example, before students begin their daily warm-ups, a simple statement such as "Remember to use complete sentences and your academic vocabulary" can go a long way. As Dean of Instruction at one high school and Instructional Coach at another, we implemented the use of complete sentences schoolwide. Teachers in *every* content area ***modeled*** the use of complete sentences (including compound, complex, etc.) with academic vocabulary incorporated and ***encouraged*** using completed sentences in their daily assignments. When we took this effort schoolwide, we saw and heard that students complained about practicing it from one class to the next, but the writing samples improved across the board, in all subjects, not just in English class. We saw that the other content areas appreciated the support and improvement that this small change created.

In seeking engagement in academic discourse and writing, certain minilessons are essential. See Figure 4 to get you started.

- Academic language is… and is not…
- How does effective and respectful academic language look in writing? In conversation? In heated debates? Online? In discussing controversial issues?
- How does academic language and tone change when writing to different audiences? Have students write/tell a short story to their best friend. Then, have them write/tell the same story to their grandmother/pastor/boss/ head coach/police officer/principal. Highlight a few examples in front of the class and discuss how the tone changed based on who received the letter.

Figure 4. Academic Language Minilessons

As mentioned previously, modeling also matters in implementing these ideas. It is essential that we model, often repeatedly, to get the quality we expect. Model academic discourse and writing during warm-ups, during writing and reading conferences, during small group discussions, during minilessons, etc. Students need to see us write in front of them. They need to see the struggles we endure with idea development, writer's block, word choice, revision, etc. They need to see how we overcome those experiences. They need to *hear* our thinking while we model. Challenge yourself to perform a new writing experience for the first time in front of your students, without any preparation beforehand. Let. Them. See. You. STRUGGLE.

Conclusion

Although we live in this emoji world, students are perfectly capable of reaching our academic language goals. I genuinely believe students thirst for professional, academic discourse. They want and need to step away from the confines of language on the internet. They need now, more than ever, the personal insight that only writing offers. Students can succeed here; they just need teachers who believe in their capabilities to light the way.

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