

# What If We Let the Students Do the Talking?

Substantive Conversation as a Pedagogical Tool

Anne-Marie Lafortune



I remember standing at the back of a classroom arranged in neat rows and watching my college-level English as a second language (ESL) students watch a short video projected on the screen at the front. This video came with the activity book, as did a series of relatively pertinent questions related to the topic at hand. However, there were a few things I found problematic from a pedagogical standpoint, including:

1. My students had not chosen the topic;
2. They would then have to discuss it among themselves in English, while they communicate fluently in French, their mother tongue, on a daily basis;
3. Only 20% of students seemed to be paying attention to the content of the video;
4. All had the same questions about this content, dictated by an activity book, and not necessarily related to their interests;
5. The obvious lack of interest in the subject had the effect of affecting their motivation and enthusiasm—and thus mine;
6. And I myself would end up correcting 30 copies (90 if you count my 3 groups that were doing the activity) with the same redundant answers.

I remember feeling some tension in my body at that moment as I mentally apologized to them: "I'm sorry, I'll find another strategy!" But by what magic trick was I going to pull it off? That I didn't know.

I also recall coming to a realization of sorts: I had to think differently about the skills of my discipline and allow students to talk with each other about topics that affect them and that transcend borders. The groundwork was laid for what would become, a few years later, Worldchat.live Education,<sup>1</sup> a web-based platform that connects teachers from around the world to allow them to pair up their students so they can engage in substantive conversations in a safe and authentic environment.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Worldchat.live Education platform was created in 2019 by Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles ESL teacher Anne-Marie Lafortune, with funding from the Entente Canada-Quebec program. Inspired on a teaching experience at Australia's Flinders University involving students from all over the world (Colombia, Saudi Arabia, China and other countries), the platform virtually recreates this intercultural pedagogical mosaic and invites students from around the world to engage in substantive conversations with their peers.



## Rethinking competencies

In a second language course, four skills must be worked on and evaluated: reading, writing, listening and speaking, all under the umbrella of the classic syntactic elements. From my earliest days in language teaching, my mentors encouraged me to work and assess these skills in isolation: designing a reading comprehension on one topic, watching a video on another topic, and so on. It can feel like a puzzle of pieces that form a disjointed picture from both the student's and the teacher's perspective.

In my classes, I have traditionally copied the model I learned with myself and used the tools provided by publishers—which are usually in the form

of grammar and activity books (skills books). While these books offer interesting activities for working through the material, my students and I have often expressed a desire to go further in terms of pedagogy.

When colleagues or I had the "revolutionary" idea of linking these skills, the topics discussed were still mostly dictated by the teachers. Yet the literature shows that to meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse learner population, it is desirable to use a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that not only relays pedagogical content, but also engages the learner in authentic activities that elicit disciplinary discourse (Lampert, 2004). So-called "substantive" conversations among students contribute to this by deconstructing preconceptions, piquing their curiosity, validating their understanding, and developing higher-order cognitive skills.

Isn't that the objective of courses offered at the college level? Is the purpose of a philosophy course simply to transfer knowledge about philosophy? Do 45 hours of instruction in French as a second language have the sole objective of making students better able to speak the language of Molière? Beyond the pure subject matter, students also learn transversal competencies as they become global citizens. With a rich diversity of learners, the education system has vast possibilities for pedagogical strategies, and substantive conversation may be one way to go.

## Learning to dialogue

Substantive conversation is a form of discussion-based lessons developing students' conceptual and linguis-

tic skills through guided discourse. Learners engage in exchanges with their peers and teacher to communicate their personal understanding and negotiate the meaning of content at different levels (Goldenberg, 1991). Providing multiple opportunities for students to discuss ideas with others promotes strategic reflection supported by peers; for example, one can imagine collaborative work on a lab report in a biology course between students from France and Quebec working on the same experiment. Finding the "right" answer becomes secondary to discovering the process or reasoning behind a notion.

Integrating this method of teaching with academically rich vocabulary and higher-order<sup>2</sup> issues is particularly effective for language minority students (Goldenberg, 1991). Providing ample opportunities to contribute to stimulating content-based discussions increases student participation and willingness to present their ideas related to the teaching topics. In addition, as teachers improve their ability to use higher-order questions to guide discourse, they are also able to more easily perceive students' preconceptions and redirect them with questions that help them to reconsider their thinking, interact with their peers to choose a different approach, or arrive at a correct conclusion (Johnson et al., 2013).

Substantive conversations require considerable interaction related to the pedagogical task at hand and involve a high level of reflection during the process of negotiating meaning with peers (e.g., drawing conclusions, challenging ideas, or asking questions). The discussion among students

<sup>2</sup> Higher-order questions are those that students cannot answer by simply recalling or reading information verbatim. As established in Bloom's taxonomy revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), higher-order questions foster critical thinking and creativity skills because these types of questions expect students to apply, analyze, evaluate, or even create new information, rather than simply recall facts.

can be guided but is not completely scripted or controlled by the teacher. It requires students to generate authentic discourse in a coherent manner to promote a better collective understanding of the content (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993). It thus provides learning opportunities for them to interact not only with the content, but also with each other, through authentic dialogue guided by a key question or learning outcome (Johnson et al., 2013). In the case of a college-level philosophy course, for example, one could imagine reflection questions developed by teachers from Quebec and Spain about philosophical conceptions of the human being and its issues.

Teachers who use substantive conversations<sup>3</sup> encourage students to recall their own ideas and perspectives on a topic, then engage in rich dialogue with their peers to draw out shared understandings and key information

and ultimately resolve any confusion about the problem. This method of cognitive inquisition allows students to collectively think through a problem before they begin to solve it. For example, a pair of chemistry students might hypothesize about the possible outcomes of an experiment before beginning lab work. Both would examine the problem as a doctor might examine a patient before determining treatment. In this way, students learn to look for clues about how to approach a task or problem. They are able to see the work in front of them from a situational perspective, taking into account the academic vocabulary involved and drawing on previous experiences to generate solutions.

Conversation plays a critical role in the modern educational cycle. In order for students to begin to think by and for themselves, they must be placed in an environment that supports a

community of practice that operates according to pedagogical principles involving higher-order cognitive skills. Students negotiate meaning through a structure that transfers responsibility for learning from teachers to students.

## Dialogue for learning

As Bakhtin (1981) notes, "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's "own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (p. 294). In other words, if students are not verbally exchanging about a topic, they are not developing academic discourse. We often think we have done a remarkable job teaching students and wonder why they are not learning; the key is for learners to

<sup>3</sup> Johnson et al. (2013) provide examples of what a substantive conversation is not:

- Teaching in which students are given facts and information copied into a notebook or journal;
- Reading about a topic or discussing factual results of an activity (i.e., lab investigation) in small groups or among partners;
- Answering a list of questions on a worksheet;
- Asking closed-ended questions with one-word answers or questions that are answered by the teacher;
- Transcribing definitions from a book as a vocabulary building exercise.



talk with each other, purposefully, using academic language—imagine the richness of an exchange between students at college and those at a post-secondary school in South Africa in the context of a social service course.

Telling students what we want them to know is certainly a faster way to meet standards. But telling does not necessarily equate to learning, and classroom discussions are often limited and used to check for understanding rather than to develop thinking. Several decades ago, Flanders (1970) reported that teachers of high-achieving students spent about 55% of class time talking, compared to 80% for teachers of low-achieving students.

The fact that a student has difficulty with the material at first can be an important part of learning, but we

sometimes expect students to work independently too soon, too often, or without any support. When this happens, students immediately turn to the teacher (in a foreign language class, the student will ask, for example, how to say a word in German); instead, an interesting alternative is to encourage the learner to ask classmates first in order to value peer teaching, and then to validate with their teacher as needed.

In addition to the sheer volume of speech that teachers deliver in the classroom, researchers have identified types of speech in terms of their degree of usefulness. For example, Durkin's (1978) seminal research on comprehension instruction confirmed that teachers rely primarily on questioning to check for understanding. Questioning is an important tool in teaching, but students also need opportunities for dialogue to learn. And, unfortunately, most questioning



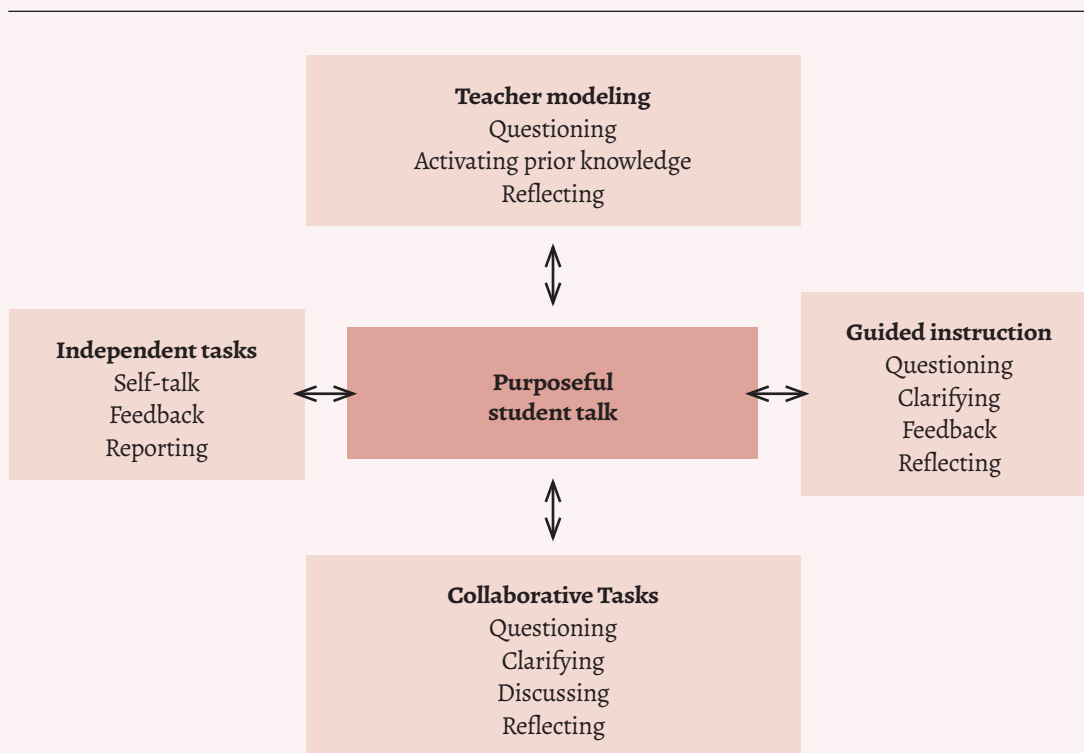
uses an initiate-answer-evaluate cycle (Cazden, 1988) in which teachers ask a question, a student answers, and then the teacher evaluates the answer.

The problems inherent in this type of approach are multiple. First, in a classroom where we want students to talk (to practise and apply the knowledge they are developing), only one student has the opportunity to speak and, as we saw in the example

cited in Cazden (1988) earlier, this type of exchange does not require the use of a single complete sentence, let alone extended speech. In a classroom setting where we want students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate, this type of exchange also does not require them to engage in critical thinking. Instead, they can become frustrated as they struggle to "guess what's in the teacher's head," or become disengaged as they listen to the "popcorn" model

Figure 1

### Types of conversations



Source: Fisher, Rothenberg and Frey (2008)



of teacher question, student answer, teacher question, student answer, and so on.

Any type of discourse used in the classroom should be focused; it cannot be purely social in nature if we want to see improvements in student learning. Fisher, Rothenberg, and Frey (2008) propose a model for integrating pedagogical conversations into the classroom: beginning with the example set by the teacher, continuing with clear instructions, collaborative tasks, and

finally individual tasks. The Worldchat.live Education conversational platform is a tool inspired by this concept to guide student exchanges. The modeling is done by the teacher who, among other things, through classroom activities, guides the dialogue by means of discussion questions set for specific topics (environment, education, culture, etc.) that the students will have to discuss with their Worldchat partner (Figure 2). By discussing and collaborating in this way, students find themselves sharing while engaging

in reflective practice. Subsequently, depending on the type of evaluation proposed by the teacher, students are led through individual tasks to internal dialogue (e.g., a written reflection on their experience, challenges and successes to be repeated), to feedback (e.g., a self-evaluation of their pronunciation, vocabulary choice, arguments) or to information sharing (e.g., an in-class or written presentation of their reflections on their learning).

Figure 2

## Examples of higher-level questions related to the topic of the environment

Week week 6 Subject Environment Due date dd/mm/yyyy

**Discussion item :**

- How is the environmental situation in your neighbourhood?
- What are the most serious environmental problems in your country?
- What will happen if we continue to pollute the environment?
- What is your opinion about climate change?
- What are the causes of environmental pollution?
- What is your community doing to protect the environment?
- Have you ever participated in any environmental initiatives? If so, which ones?
- What can you do to make the world a better place?
- Open discussion

Source: Worldchat.live Education Platform

## Worldchat.live Education

Worldchat.live Education's pedagogical approach focuses on active learning in order to place the student at the center of their learning. This approach, in addition to supporting the student's autonomy, aims for a greater commitment on their part, particularly through the choice of subjects to be worked on. We can thus imagine a progressive pedagogical scaffolding where the subject is first explored in class and individually, and then discussed among students from different countries. Key information, including metacognitive development, is then documented in the form of a project, a paper, or even a portfolio.

Worldchat.live Education provides authentic conversational situations for students that translate into projects taking different forms depending on the teacher. For example, this session, students from the Cégep de Sept-Îles will hold five conversations in English with their respective partners from Seoul National University in South Korea and will be asked to keep a log detailing what they have learned, including new vocabulary. The teacher may also ask them to review video recordings of conversations with their partners and include a self-reflection on their intonation and fluency by comparing their first and last exchange. These projects take place in a safe environment since the collaborations are initiated by the teachers through a specific course of action.

1. A teacher finds a colleague from another school in the world on the website, based on pedagogical criteria (e.g. class level or number of

students). Alternatively, the teacher can contact us at [info@worldchat.live](mailto:info@worldchat.live) with their search criteria for a personalized match;

2. The teachers then determine the length of the project and the academic topics and discussion questions, ideally taking into consideration the students' ideas and suggestions;
3. Students register on the platform using a unique code that allows them to join their class;
4. Teachers pair students (1:1) based on complementary characteristics, including personality or common interests;
5. The students get in touch with their partners via the platform, and then chat live via the video chat function embedded on the website. On the chat page, they find the discussion questions as well as a space to take notes (meeting summary, vocabulary, etc.), which are automatically saved and visible to the teacher;
6. Conversations are automatically recorded for security purposes, but also for pedagogical reasons. Teachers can use the recordings for evaluation (summative or formative) and students are able to develop their metacognitive skills by viewing the recording to reflect on key elements (content, pronunciation, fluency, etc.).

Conversations can take place during class time or outside of class time—which is more appealing to college students, especially for organizational

reasons and because of time zone differences. In my personal experience, allowing 8 weeks for students to schedule 5 meetings of at least 30 minutes each is an excellent formula. The content discussed between students can then be used for discussion groups or class projects, including a virtual portfolio (which I did with my students in an independent learning module inspired by the University of Helsinki model<sup>4</sup>).

<sup>4</sup> Editor's note: For more information on the Finnish pedagogical model, see Anne-Marie Lafortune's article "S'inspirer de la Finlande pour améliorer ses stratégies pédagogiques" in *Pédagogie collégiale*, Summer 2020 (vol. 33, no. 4).



In one year, Worldchat.live Education has already hosted:

- 2,709 students;
- 200 virtual classes;
- 27,918 chat messages sent via the site;
- 1,909 video chat sessions.

While the beta version of the platform has had its share of connectivity challenges in its early days (especially in the remote mountains of Vietnam!), the experience has always been very popular with students and teachers. They come back to the platform session after session, with their new groups, while bringing with them new colleagues to whom they want to give a new authentic pedagogical experience. For a year now, we have been using an excellent professional video chat service with 99.9% reliability. The design of the platform has also been updated, which makes for a more interesting user experience. The number of users has grown by 250% in the fall 2021 session and we now have partners around the world, including Poland, Turkey and Argentina. Obviously, planning such a pedagogical project requires organization and flexibility on the part of the teacher, but the Worldchat.live team is extremely present throughout the process, which is greatly appreciated by teachers and students alike. We also offer a social credit program to ensure access to lower income students and schools. Everyone's enthusiasm concerns the same aspects: authentic substantive conversation, active learning and cross-cultural bonding.

Recently, a teacher at the Universidad Técnica Nacional in Costa Rica paired her 30 students with those of a teacher at the Cégep de Saint-Jérôme, and her 35 other students with those of a teacher in Vietnam. In addition to practising English in an authentic context and improving their ability to converse in their second language, the students experienced a cultural exchange through all sorts of situations, some of them

funny. For example, at one point, a student met all of her Vietnamese partner's family members as they stood behind the screen, curious to see this Costa Rican student—not to mention the accents and some word-for-word translations that sometimes made no sense! The discussion topics also greatly nourished the students on a pedagogical and human level, whether they concerned the education system or the place of women in society.

### **Planning: a crucial step**

As the backward design model (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) reminds us, any pedagogical activity used in the classroom must first be related to a skill that will be appropriately evaluated—and the thinking and preparation concerning the use of Worldchat.live Education is no exception.

The consensus among teachers who have used the platform is that the following timeline for a fall session is a good starting point for organizing a pedagogical activity with students.

Table 1

## Proposed timeline for organizing a pedagogical activity

<b>August</b>	Explore course competencies	Focus on the ones that apply to the project
	Determine evaluations related to the project	Consider the nature, format and progression (e.g. formative or summative, written or oral, individual or collaborative)
	Contact Anne-Marie Lafortune at info@worldchat.live	Indicate the course, level (if applicable), start date, number of conversations desired, and number of students enrolled in the course
<b>September</b>	Create a teacher account (video tutorial available on the website) and virtually meet with the partner teacher	<p>Discuss the modalities of the project and clarify the important points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the activity count for points?</li> <li>• What are the deadlines?</li> <li>• Are there any public holidays or vacations to consider?</li> <li>• What will your policy be if students don't show up for an appointment with their partner?</li> </ul>
	Present the project to the students (video tutorial available on the website)	<p>To situate the project well within the framework of the course and its different modalities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short research project on the partner country</li> <li>• Development of class discussion questions</li> <li>• Clarification of certain logistical aspects (time difference, first contact in writing, importance of the first meeting, etc.)</li> <li>• Presentation of the project schedule</li> <li>• Student registration on the website (in class or at home)</li> </ul>
	Match students and add pedagogical discussion questions via the website; this is done by the teachers	
<b>October</b>	Matched students contact each other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Send a first message via the website</li> <li>• Determine the time and day of the first meeting</li> <li>• Plan a meeting schedule from the outset, ideally at regular intervals (same day, same time)</li> </ul>
<b>October - December</b>	Matched students have discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan three to five meetings between the second week of October and early December</li> <li>• Calculate one meeting/week, with one or two weeks of flexibility for unforeseen events (forgetfulness, work, etc.)</li> </ul>
	Evaluations	To be established in coherence with the nature of the evaluations during the session (e.g., written report, oral presentation, small group discussion during class, viewing of recordings, self-evaluation of progress)

## Conclusion

Originally developed for ESL courses, Worldchat.live Education has now opened its doors to all disciplines, because authentic conversations about substantive pedagogical topics undeniably lead to superior skills development. Imagine your CEGEP students engaging in an authentic conversation about course content (the family in a sociology class, addictions in a nursing class, or workplace safety in an industrial maintenance class) with students in a similar class

on the other side of the world; the pedagogical potential is endless!

For me, beyond a simple "chat," my students had to describe to their partner on the other side of the world what snow feels like and how it is possible to wear tattoos in Canada without necessarily being part of a street gang. They took turns with a different word, pronunciation or expression to enthusiastically explain to their partner in a foreign country what the climate, food, festivals and life in Quebec is like. And, rather than reading

or watching a video about the social hierarchy and education system on another continent, my students discussed it face-to-face with a person living there—all while practising English as a second language.

Isn't this an incredible pedagogical and human experience? I believe I have indeed found (and developed!) this other strategy that allows authentic exchanges, transcends borders and creates bridges between cultures. And I am now convinced: let students do the talking and see the magic happen! ■

## References

- ANDERSON, L. W. et al. *A Taxonomy of Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, New York, Longman, 2001.
- BAKHTIN, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- BLOOM, B.S. et al. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain*, Ann Arbor, MI: David McKay Company, 1956.
- CAZDEN, C. *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1988.
- DURKIN, D. "What Classroom Observations Reveal about Reading Comprehension Instruction," *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 14, n° 4, 1978-1979, pp. 481-533.
- FISHER, D., C. ROTHENBERG and N. FREY. *Content-Area Conversations: How to Plan Discussion-Based Lessons for Diverse Language Learners*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008.
- FLANDERS, N. A. *Analyzing Teaching Behavior*. Addison-Wesley, 1970.
- GOLDENBERG, C. *Instructional Conversations and their Classroom Applications*, NCRCDSSL Educational Practice Reports, Berkeley, National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1991.
- JOHNSON et al. *Synthesis of Effective Teaching Strategies and Practices—A Handbook for Secondary Mathematics and Science Teachers*, San Antonio: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2013.
- LAMPERT, M. "When the Problem is Not the Question and the Solution is Not the Answer: Mathematical Knowing and Teaching." In CARPENTER, T.P., J.A. DOSSEY, and J.L. KOELHER (eds.), *Classics in Mathematics Education Research*. Reston: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2004.
- NEWMANN, F.M. and G.G. WEHLAGE. "Five Standards of Authentic Instruction," *Educational Leadership*, vol. 50, n° 7, 1993, pp. 8-12.
- WIGGINS, G. and J. MCTIGHE. "Backward Design," in *Understanding by Design*, s.l., Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998, pp. 13-34.



**Anne-Marie Lafortune** teaches English as a second language at the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles. Holding a masters in college pedagogy, she focuses her research on student perceptions of the Community of Inquiry in blended synchronous delivery modes. She has also obtained two grants from the Entente Canada-Quebec program for the implementation of an active learning classroom (CLAAC) at the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles and for the development of the Worldchat.live Education platform. She received the Canadian Association for Teacher Education Master's award as well as the Performa award for excellence in education in 2019.

[amlafortune@cegepgim.ca](mailto:amlafortune@cegepgim.ca)