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CHALLENGING LEARNING Through DIALOGUE

Strategies to Engage Your Students and
Develop Their Language of Learning



FOR INFORMATION

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Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nottingham, James, author. | Nottingham, Jill, author. | Renton, Martin, author.

Title: Challenging learning through dialogue : strategies to engage your students and develop their language of learning / by James Nottingham, Jill Nottingham and Martin Renton.

Description: International Edition. | Thousand Oaks, California : Corwin, a SAGE company, [2017] | Series: Challenging learning series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016044636 | ISBN 9781506376851 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Questioning. | Communication in education. | Teacher-student relationships.

Classification: LCC LB1027.44 .N67 2017b | DDC 371.3/7—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016044636>

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

17 18 19 20 21 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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'The whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with one another, so as not to depend upon the understanding of one man, but to depend upon the counsel of all.'

(Wilson, 2014)

DIALOGUE STRUCTURES



7.0 • PREVIEW

This chapter includes an outline of some useful cooperative learning structures that encourage dialogue, including these:

- Corners
- Pairs
- Think-Pair-Share (and Think-Write-Share-Compare)
- Opinion Lines and Concept Lines
- Talking Heads and Jigsaw Groups

All of the strategies are excellent ways to engage your students in collaborative dialogue. They are also easy to put into practice and will give your students the chance to be a bit more active than in many traditional forms of dialogue.

Dialogue structures are useful tools for engaging and focussing students' attention.

7.1 • PAIRED DIALOGUE

In Pairs

Directing students to talk in pairs is so common that it hardly seems worth mentioning. It differs from Think-Pair-Share in that pairs aren't always given any initial thinking time and may not be asked to share with other students at the end. You simply ask pairs to share their thoughts with a partner on a task,

Structures for paired dialogue include Think-Pair-Share and Think-Write-Share-Compare.

question or problem. The main use of this strategy is to get students thinking. It is often said that people don't know their thoughts until they have expressed them. This structure compels students to prompt each other to express their thoughts and, in so doing, discover what they really think.

After each pair has worked on a question or task, you can team them up with another pair to summarise what they discussed. Prompt them to discuss similarities and differences between each pair's summary. Afterwards the fours can divide back into two pairs and perhaps team up with another pair.

Think-Pair-Share

Ask your students a question or give them a task. Then give them individual thinking time. After that, ask your students to get together with a partner to discuss and develop their ideas. After a reasonable amount of time, give each pair a chance to share their thinking with the whole group. Take as many responses from pairs as time allows.

Think-Write-Share-Compare

A variation of Think-Pair-Share is Think-Write-Share-Compare. For this structure, ask your students a question or set them a task and get each one to write down their initial ideas independently of each other. Then pair your students up and ask them to read out their ideas to each other. The discussion in pairs should then focus on the similarities and differences between their ideas.

If you collect your students' writing at the end, it can give you useful insight into their thinking and provide you with ideas for future lessons.

7.2 • OPINION LINES

Opinion Lines are very useful for beginning to explore statements using examples, gauging degrees of agreement and disagreement or identifying degrees of preference.

Opinion Lines are useful for exploring the relative degree of agreement and disagreement.

As with the Opinion Corners activity (see Section 7.3), you should begin by inviting your students to take an initial stance and to discuss their choice with the people around them, making sure to give their reasons. The difference with Opinion Lines is that they allow for more nuanced responses than do Corners because there is the opportunity to compare *degrees* of agreement or disagreement.

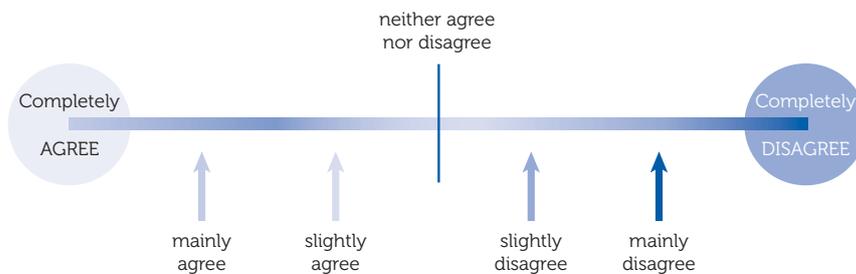
Opinion Lines give your students the opportunity to:

- show (literally) where they stand on an issue,
- see the spread of opinion in the group,
- think critically about their own and others' views,
- demonstrate changes in opinion through physical movement.

Setting Up an Opinion Line

1. Create a line long enough for all your students to stand along. It might help to mark this with a rope or some string.
2. Mark one end with a Completely Agree sign and the other with a Completely Disagree sign. Talk through the other descriptors shown in Figure 7 if you think it will help your students understand the degrees of agreement and disagreement.

► **Figure 7: Opinion Line Diagram**



3. Formulate a statement that expresses a point of view relating to the topic your students are in dialogue about. Make it bold and contentious to increase the likelihood of everyone having an opinion. For example:
 - We should celebrate Christmas four times per year.
 - School should start with two hours of sport every day.
 - All bullies should be banned from school.
 - Bullies should have their mobile devices taken away for three weeks.
 - Mobile devices should be given free to all students.
 - Mobile devices should be banned in all schools.
 - Students should be paid to go to school.
 - Everyone should be made to eat at least eight portions of fruit or vegetables per day.
 - All violent dogs should be put down.
 - Sixteen-year-olds should be allowed to drive cars.
 - Teenagers should not be allowed to get a lift in a car driven by another teenager (since this is one of the most likely causes of death in sixteen- to twenty-four-year olds in developed countries).
 - Hamlet was a flawed character.
4. Explain to your students that you are going to give them a contentious statement to think about. Say they will have time to think about it first; then you will ask them to stand on the part of the line that corresponds with how much they agree or disagree with the statement.
5. Once your students have taken a place on the line, get them to talk with the people around them to compare their reasons for standing where they are. The

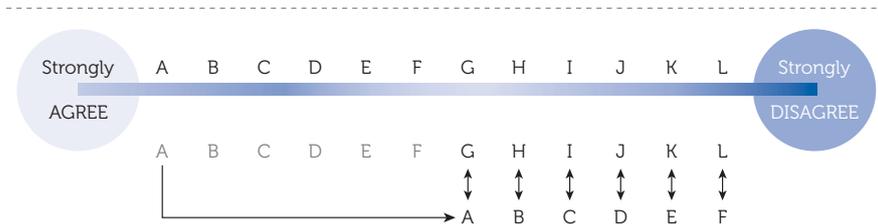
Here are some useful topics for introducing Opinion Lines to students.

Here are some example questions to engage students during opinion line dialogues.

following prompts should help them ensure their conversation is more exploratory (see Section 2.6.3) than cumulative (see Section 2.6.1):

- What do you think?
 - What are your reasons?
 - I agree with you because . . .
 - I disagree with you because . . .
 - Is there another way of looking at this?
 - What if . . . ?
 - Have we considered all the factors?
 - What have we agreed on?
6. An extension of this is to get students to pair up with someone from a very different part of the line. You could get your students to choose their partner, or you could orchestrate it in the way shown in Figure 8.

► **Figure 8: Comparing Different Opinions Along an Opinion Line**



Using the language of thinking will enhance the success of opinion line dialogues.

Notice that in this opinion line, we have chosen the labels Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree as these might sometimes be more appropriate than Completely Agree and Completely Disagree as used in Figure 7.

7. Thinking language that might help with opinion lines include the following:
- | | | | | |
|-----------|----------|----------|------------|------------|
| fact | reason | evidence | opinion | assumption |
| persuade | reliable | agree | convince | disagree |
| exception | if/then | example | conclusion | argument |

8. The following are a few alternative ways to set up an opinion line:

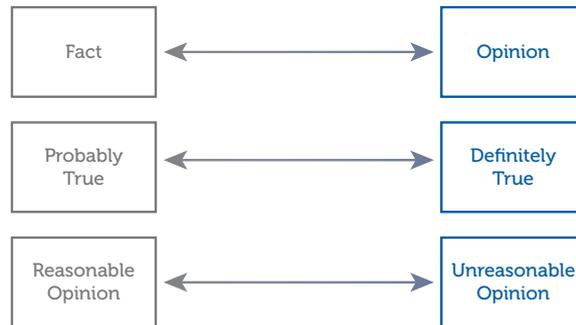
Alternative 1: Read out an item and ask just a few of your students to decide how they would respond. Once the chosen few have decided where to stand on the line, you can then invite other students to ask them questions about their positions. The questions might explore reasons and alternative ideas. Ask the students on the line to move if at any point their opinion changes in response to the comments and questions from their classmates.

Alternative 2: Combine opinion lines with role-play. Your students could take the roles of characters and position themselves according to how they think the characters would respond. They could answer questions in character.

Alternative 3: Give different groups different opinion lines. For example, split your students into three groups and give each group one of the three opinion lines in Figure 9.

Varying the ways of using Opinion Lines will keep students engaged longer.

► **Figure 9: Variations of Opinion Lines**



Now give the *same* statement to all three groups, irrespective of which opinion line they are being asked to stand on.

For example, you could use the statement 'Stealing is wrong'. One group can then consider if this is a fact or an opinion; the second group should consider if it is probably true or definitely true; the third group can think about whether it is a reasonable opinion or an unreasonable opinion. This in itself can create an interesting dialogue about the differences in responses between groups.

Here are some more example statements for you to use:

- It is against the law to steal.
- Robin Hood was right to steal from the rich to give to the poor.
- Robin Hood was a moral man.
- It is good to share.
- If a teacher confiscates something from you, then this is not stealing.
- More people will go to the moon in the twenty-first century than went in the twentieth century.
- Religion has been the root cause for many wars.
- Sunshine is good for you.
- Too much sunshine is bad for you.
- Serial killers should receive the death sentence.

7.3 • OPINION CORNERS

Opinion Corners have a similar structure to Opinion Lines and so can be introduced in a similar way. The main difference is that using the Corners will prevent your students from 'sitting on the fence' because Corners requires them to choose from one of four descriptors: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. Set up Opinion Corners as shown in Figure 10.

Opinion Corners require an exact choice, whereas Opinion Lines allow students to 'sit on the fence'.

► Figure 10: Opinion Corners



After you read a statement (examples are given below), your students should stand in the corner that best represents their opinion on the matter. Tell them they have to choose one of the corners. They cannot stand somewhere in the middle. They must make a decision as to the one that is the best description of their opinion. They are allowed to move if they change their minds, but even then they should move from one corner to another rather than to the middle or off to a side somewhere.

Once your students have chosen a corner, get them to talk about their choice with the people around them. After that, get a spokesperson from each corner to give a summary of the reasons why the people in their corner made the choice they did. This will give your students a chance to hear different perspectives on the issue.

Statements for Opinion Corners

Here are some statements to get you started with Opinion Corners.

Here are some useful starter topics for introducing Opinion Corners to students.

- It is wrong to steal.
- You must never talk to strangers.
- Students should never have to take tests.
- Parents should be fined if they take their children on holiday during school term time.
- Students should be allowed to listen to their own music during lessons.
- Violent video games are a bad influence on young people and should be banned.
- The big, bad wolf wasn't really bad. He was just misunderstood.
- Footballers are paid too much money.
- Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime. (Aristotle)
- We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back. (Malala Yousafzai)
- Everyone in the world should be made to speak Spanish as well as their own language.
- Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world. (Nelson Mandela)

The Benefits of Opinion Corners

(Martin) In comparison to Opinion Lines, Opinion Corners emphasise the different views everyone holds and introduce quite distinct groupings. For that reason, Opinion Corners are very useful in developing not only skills of reasoning and explanation but also the language of persuasion.

The benefit of tasks such as these is that students are actively involved in building their own understanding. When using these strategies with students, we have often noticed how the opinions and reasons of others stay with the students for longer. Because they actively process the information (physically and cognitively), the students retain it for longer. This is a real benefit in developing the use of Opinion Corners in the classroom and I often use it as a precursor of written argument.

Ask your students to structure an assignment around the responses given during an Opinion Corners activity. For example, set up the Opinion Corners with a statement such as 'The British were against the slave trade'. The students go to the corner that best represents their opinion, give reasons for their choices and listen to the views of others.

The students can then structure their written assignment according to what they have heard in the activity.

Paragraph 1: I agree that (the British were against the slave trade) because (give a key reason from their corner).

Paragraph 2: In addition, people might also suggest that (give further reasons from their corner).

Paragraph 3: However, other people disagree. They say (give reasons from the disagree corner).

Paragraph 4: Whereas other people would argue that (give reasons from one or both of the remaining corners).

Paragraph 5: So in conclusion, whilst some people would say (make statement), I believe that (make personal statement) because (give reasons).

This structure for written work can be reinforced – especially with older students – during the Opinion Corners activity by having flipchart paper or sticky notes in each corner for the students to write their opinions on. The whole class can then move around and read the selection of opinions, rather than just sharing verbally.

These open, challenging tasks engage interest and encourage respect for others' points of view, building a climate in which the students more readily recognise and value the opinions of others and see collaborative talk and diversity as valuable opportunities for learning. Take advantage of this diversity by encouraging the students to reflect on all the reasons they have heard and to move corners if they wish. This emphasises to the students that it is okay to hear different opinions and change your mind, which is also a good indicator that students are making progress in thinking and understanding.

If a student moves corners, it is a great opportunity to ask the student what they heard that made them change their mind. This encourages the idea of persuasive language, can add to students' verbal and written vocabulary and reinforces the idea that reflection is part of successful learning. Written vocabulary can then be built on further by asking questions such as 'How would you encourage other people to come to your corner?'

Opinion
Corners lend
themselves
better than
Opinion
Lines to the
development
of persuasive
language.

An additional bonus with Opinion Corners is that it places the teacher in the direct role of mediator – supporting, prompting and questioning the process of learning, rather than giving answers. As the only person who is allowed to stand in the middle of the room, the teacher is, quite literally, the only person with 'no opinion'. Placing ourselves in this position emphasises the role of the teacher as facilitator, rather than the font of all knowledge.

7.4 • CHOOSING CORNERS

Options for Opinion Corners always range from strongly agree to strongly disagree, whereas Choosing Corners offers the flexibility to assign different items to each corner (e.g., questions, images or concepts).

Here are some useful starter topics for introducing Choosing Corners to young students.

Here are some useful starter topics for introducing Choosing Corners to older students.

This structure uses Corners again, but this time the focus isn't on opinion; rather, it is on giving reasons for a choice. The items might be questions, statements, concepts, situations, images, arguments and so on.

For example:

- Choose the question you most want to discuss.
- Choose the statement you agree with (or disagree with) most.
- Choose the concept you want to explore or create questions about.
- Choose the situation you would rather be in.
- Choose the item you think is most important.
- Choose the image you like most.

Example for Younger Students

Put photographs of a drink (e.g., water), a fast food (e.g., pizza), the sun and a fruit (e.g., an apple) in each of four corners (one photo per corner). Then ask the following questions:

1. Which is the healthiest one?
2. Which one would your parents say you should not have too much of?
3. Which one would you like to have lots of at a party?
4. Which one would be nicest to have on a school day?
5. Which one would be nicest to have on a holiday?

Example for Older Students

Put photographs of different-sized settlements (e.g., hamlet, village, town, city) or different artworks in each of four corners (one photo per corner). Then ask questions such as the following:

For the settlements

1. Where are you most likely to find happy people?
2. Which one is the best to live in if you're a child? A parent? An old person?
3. Where would you hear the most noise during the day? During the night?

For the artwork

1. Which one is the saddest? Which is the most joyful?
2. Which one do you think took longest to paint?

3. Which one makes the strongest statement about . . . (e.g., feminism, war, politics)?

Give your students thinking time to make their choice. Encourage them to move around the room, considering each option. Then ask them to go to their chosen corners and share with others who have chosen the same corner why they have made that particular choice. If a large number of students are in the same corner, then they could split into pairs or threes. After a short while, invite a spokesperson from each group to explain the group's thinking. As each group does this, draw attention to the similarities and differences of the reasons given. In particular, highlight any contradictions or inconsistencies.

The benefit of this activity is that it gets students moving around the room and therefore changes the dynamic (and maybe even the thinking). It also gives you the opportunity to draw attention more clearly to the differing opinions amongst your students.

7.5 • TALKING HEADS

One of the problems with small-group dialogues is that some students may opt out if they feel they are not being listened to or if another participant is dominating. *Talking Heads* is a good way to reduce the chance of this happening.

To begin with, split your students into groups of three or four and ask them to identify themselves with numbers (one, two, three, four). Check to see that they know what their number is. If there are some groups with one less than the norm, then give one person two numbers. If there are some groups with one more than the norm, then give two people the same number.

Once students are in their groups, give them a question or task to tackle.

After a period of discussion, stop all the groups and focus their attention on you. Now call out a number and ask all those students identified with that number to report back on what their group discussed.

If they discussed more than one item, the process can be repeated with further numbers so that different students complete the report back.

The students' perceptions of the randomness of the number calling encourages them all to take responsibility for being prepared and helping each other become prepared to answer. It is also a time-effective way of having a plenary session because not all students give feedback but all have contributed in their groups.

Talking Heads increases students' attention by giving the impression that anyone can be picked at any time to speak.

7.6 • JIGSAW GROUPS

Jigsaw Grouping is another good way to stop some students opting out of dialogue activities. Assigning each student a 'jigsaw' piece of information will ensure all your students are dependent upon each other in order for everyone to succeed.

Jigsaw Groups were designed by social psychologist Elliot Aronson to help weaken racial cliques in forcibly integrated schools.

Here is a slightly adapted explanation for Jigsaw Groups from the website Jigsaw Classroom (www.jigsaw.org).

Jigsaw Groups give each student the responsibility of being the 'expert' for their part of the jigsaw.

Jigsaw in Eight Easy Steps

1. Divide your students into groups of five. These are the home groups.
2. Divide the activity into five segments. For example, if you want history students to learn about Anne Frank, you might divide a short biography of her into stand-alone segments on (1) her early life; (2) the period before going into hiding; (3) life in her hiding place; (4) arrest, deportation and death; (5) her legacy.
3. Give each home group one of the segments to read. Give them time to question each other, discuss difficult words and make notes.
4. Ask each student in the home group to number themselves one to five.
5. Person 1 from each home group then moves to sit with all the other number 1s. Person 2 sits with all other number 2s on another table and so on. These new groups are the away groups.
6. Each member of the away group takes it in turn to present his or her segment to the other students in this new group. By sharing the information that they are expert in, the whole group develops a picture of the full topic.
7. Once all of the information has been shared in the away group, the students can return to their home group and share what they have learnt about the other segments.
8. Each of the students now knows about one aspect of the topic in depth and the whole topic in breadth. A quiz can be given to help the students realise how much they have learnt about the whole topic from their dialogue with each other.

7.7 • CLUSTERING

Clustering is a good way to get students moving and making links.

Clustering is an effective activity for promoting active and engaged dialogue around a theme or concept. It is also a good way to get your students into different groupings from normal.

1. Give each of your students a card with a different statement or fact relating to the key concept or theme. For example, if your theme is 'weather', then you could use the following cards:

Sun	Infiltration
Rain	Hail
Snow	Ice
Evaporation	Lake
Precipitation	Sea
Condensation	Vegetation
Transpiration	Soil
Runoff	Wind

Or if you are just looking to group your students relatively randomly, then you could give each of them one of these sports cards:

Football	Badminton
Cricket	Running
Handball	Hurdles

Baseball	Cycling
Tennis	Rowing
Swimming	Sailing
Hockey	Climbing
Karate	Parachuting

- Once all your students have read their card and are confident they understand it, ask them to move around the room and find links with other cards. Once they have found links with other cards, then they should cluster together to form groups. If a group gets too big, then it might need to break up into subgroups.
- Your students should be able to clearly identify what connects each of the cards in their group. For example, if the students holding the cards with rain, snow, hail and ice have clustered together, then they should be able to say their connection is types of precipitation. Or if a group has come together with cards saying swimming, karate, running and hurdles, then they might say these are all sports that do not require a bat or a ball. Of course, these are just examples. The students could have grouped themselves in different ways and indeed could have given different reasons for the same groupings (e.g., rain, snow, hail and ice are all states of water or they are all expected in winter).
- Once all of your students have clustered into groups, challenge them on their reasoning, assumptions and choices. For example, 'Why have you not included card x in your group as that also fits your criterion?'
- Each cluster can now be the dialogue groupings going forward into the next activity you have planned for your students.

7.8 • REVIEW



In this chapter we have explored various structures for dialogue. They are easy to put into practice and will offer your students opportunities to talk in structured ways that involve moving around or talking with different partners.

The sorts of questions you can encourage your students to ask during their paired and small-group dialogues include the following:

- What do you think?
- What are your reasons?
- I agree with you because . . .
- I disagree with you because . . .
- Is there another way of looking at this?
- What if . . . ?
- Have we considered all the factors?
- What have we agreed?

The language that will help them express themselves more accurately includes *fact, reason, evidence, opinion, assumption, persuade, reliable, agree, disagree, convince, exception, if/then, example, conclusion* and *argument*.

7.9 • NEXT STEPS AND FURTHER READING



Here are some suggestions for what you could do next so that you get the most out of this chapter:

1. Try out all the strategies in a series of lessons over a two-week period.
2. Record your reflections to each of these in the Repertoire and Judgement Notes section at the back of the book. Which worked best? Did different students react more positively to some strategies than to others?
3. Ask your colleagues if they have any variations on these dialogue structures, such as the Think-Write-Share-Compare version of Think-Pair-Share.

Some of the dialogue structures we have shared have been popularised by the cooperative learning movement, in particular, Robert Slavin and Spencer Kagan.

1. A good short summary of the work of Robert Slavin can be found in an article on using cooperative learning structures by Dr. Tzu-Pu Wang (2009): <http://bit.ly/190RNnB>.
2. There are many free resources on the Internet about the use of Kagan's structures. A good summary in book form is *Cooperative Learning Structures* by Kagan (2013).