Talk About Reading is a reading reminder excerpted from Reading Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques by Jim Burke.
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I asked the kids to say what they thought about the story, and one after the other, they did. Then I was ready to move on—but they wouldn’t let me. They kept talking. I wasn’t refereeing. They stopped raising their hands. They talked to each other. At one point I was going to say something, but I decided no: keep quiet, I told myself. Be glad they are talking to each other, and to Tillie Olsen. That’s what it was—a conversation between twenty-six Atlanta kids... and Tillie Olsen.

ROBERT COLES FROM THE CALL OF STORIES

RATIONALE

We talk more than we will ever write or read. Conversation is one of the primary ways we make meaning: through sharing, asking, discussing, clarifying. As Jerome Bruner wrote somewhere, it is a human need “to share the objects of our attention with others.” Using talk for different purposes in different contexts allows students the important opportunity to figure out what they think by, in part, hearing what others think. Talking also helps a wide range of students whose verbal skills need practice and development. (See Reminders 93 and 94 about elaboration and reporting strategies). ESL students, for example, need to hear how English is used and have the chance to practice it for themselves in authentic academic contexts if they are to develop the academic literacy they need to succeed. Talking about reading also brings energy and vitality into the classroom as individual viewpoints are expressed.

WHAT TO DO

• Encourage various configurations of classroom talk. Have students
  ◗ Pair up to briefly discuss an idea that the class is studying in order to make connections and meaning.
  ◗ Huddle into small groups for a discussion or to use talk for a specified purpose.
  ◗ Gather around as a whole class to share what was said in individual groups.

• Use talk to explain, explore, share, comprehend, solve, process, and appreciate.

• Use talk in both formal and informal contexts to help students better understand and allow the teacher to evaluate understanding and performance.

• Sequence learning so that each stage prepares the student for the increased intellectual demands of the next. Stages include

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Establish a Reading Culture

- Solo reading and written response to formulate initial ideas and questions
- Pairs discussion, to share and compare with a peer before returning to individual reflection with information and insights gained from the dialogue
- Group discussion, to assemble and expand understanding
- Class discussion, during which groups report what they learned and discuss how they arrived at these interpretations

- Define your role as teacher throughout the process. Because such a discussion-oriented approach makes students responsible for their own learning, it is essential that we know what to do and how to do it. During discussions of any kind, the teacher’s role is to facilitate, challenge, clarify, support, evaluate, and model.

- Use talk to help students focus their attention by discussing:
  - Implications of results and actions
  - Consequences
  - Possibilities
  - Meanings

Follow up these discussions with a conversation about how the reader arrived at a given conclusion or interpretation.

- Provide the safe, supportive, stimulating environment needed for discussions to be successful. Readers engaged in “exploratory talk” exemplify the habits of mind common to effective readers: speculation, hypothesis testing, predicting, clarifying, risk taking (in terms of possible meanings and connections). But to think in public like this requires a conducive environment (see Reminder 5).

- “Talk our way into the text,” as Douglas Barnes (1992) suggests. By using literature circles, Socratic seminars, shared inquiry, or any other discussion-based methods mentioned in this book, students will learn the skills they need to make sense of what they read.

- Scaffold discussions so that questions about a specific reading move from simple to complex. Similarly, help students in their discussion of Text B to build on what they learned from studying Text A.
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