

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### COMMENTARY

## Teachers: Know When to Stop Talking

By Thomas Newkirk

There is an old saying, “Never miss an opportunity to keep your mouth shut.” It’s good advice for us teachers, I think, because it is well documented that we talk too much. When students do speak, there is often a recitation pattern that goes like this: (1) Teacher asks question; (2) student is recognized by the teacher; (3) student answers; and (4) teacher evaluates the answer of the student. Then on to the next question, the next student.

The proportions are pretty obvious—even when students are raising their hands to respond (not always the case), the teacher has two out of every three turns. Some students choose not even to bid for recognition, often because they aren’t quick enough.

As teachers, we fall into this pattern so easily. I know I do. It is the default setting in classroom talk.

So what is wrong with this picture? This pattern works if the purpose of classroom talk is to have students share fully formulated responses—and to be judged by the teacher. But this doesn’t work if the purpose of talk is to develop that response. The response can convey understanding, but it can’t create understanding.

How many of us, after all, say what we really want to say on the first try? Rather, exploratory talk loops back again and again, as we formulate a thought, refine it, extend it, and complicate it. It’s messy. And we usually do this exploration in the presence of a sympathetic and interested audience that is not pressed for time. In this inviting space, our memory seems to work better—details are recalled, stories and other points of view mysteriously become available. That’s the gift of talk.

We can break this typical pattern with what I call the “blank turn”—a refusal to evaluate the student response and go to the next student. It sounds like this, “Say more about that.” Or this, “Yes, go on.” Or like this ... just silence. Sometimes the student apologizes, “Boy, I’m just rambling on.” And if I’m on my game, I say “Keep rambling.”

Particularly as a writing teacher, I need students to hear what hasn’t been written. It’s pointless to write on a paper “expand this” or “more detail” if the student doesn’t hear the detail he or she might add. They need this second text—the alternative story that they create orally. Then and only then can they see how the written one could be different.

[← Back to Story](#)



—Getty

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This doesn't go on forever. Given time constraints, it can't. But after a stretch of free talk on the part of the students, I can re-enter and reflect back what I have heard. **know."**

Is there a new idea, a new focus, or new details that might be included in the paper? If we are talking about a big project ahead, what directions seem promising and exciting to the writer?

A colleague of mine has a variation when she gets the inevitable "I don't know" in response to a question. She responds, "I know you don't know, honey. But if you did, what would you say?" It feels like nonsense, but it works.

It sounds easy, but listening and waiting can be hard work. Harder than talking. Talking, after all, is a form of self-stimulation. When I am tired, I tend to overtalk, create brilliant mini-lectures, or digress into personal experience, as the student sinks into silence and passivity.

Maybe we all harbor, somewhere, that model of the brilliant, charismatic teacher that we want to be. One who is dazzling and eloquent and impressive. But teaching, I am convinced, is not about us being brilliant; it is about students being brilliant. It's about them, after all. And the only way they can do this is to give them that generous gift of time and receptivity. There are few generalizations that hold for all good teachers, but I will hazard this one: Good teachers never appear rushed. Or make students feel rushed.

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I had good models for this in my own family. It was soon after World War II, and no one had much money in our small town. Entertainment was visiting each others' homes, usually unannounced. Our home was filled with stories, of the war, of events at the local college where my dad taught, of the stupidity of opposing politicians. In all this, my parents were not the tellers, but the audience.

At the time, they seemed passive and less talented than the great storytellers who stopped by. Only later, I'm embarrassed to admit, did I understand how they helped create these stories. How they brought them out. How they listened. And why they were such popular hosts. I missed all those vital cues.

So, in this age of high-tech and expensive teaching programs, let me offer up this simple and powerful intervention: the blank turn. It costs us nothing but our attention. It is built on the rock-solid principle that we need talk, and a receptive audience, to build understanding and to know what we know.

In Bernard Pomerance's play "The Elephant Man," the deformed main character, Merrick, has the experience of being listened to for the first time—and he finds he can speak: "Before I spoke with people, I did not think of those things because there was no one to think them for. But now things come out of my mouth that are true."




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