



Collaboration: More Than Just Talk

BY ELISA B. MACDONALD

Professional learning requires team members to collaborate, but what if their discourse is “just talk”?

For teams to have a positive impact on student learning, members must do more than talk about teaching and learning; they must engage in rigorous discourse—discourse that is evidence-based, dialogic, culturally proficient, reflective, and actionable. Together these five criteria elevate a team’s ability to achieve their goal of helping students achieve. All team discourse does not need to be rigorous, but team discourse without rigor is just talk.

What does rigorous discourse look like?

Rigorous Discourse Is Evidence-Based

Teams engaged in rigorous discourse ground their conversations in evidence. They work strategically with a diverse pool of assessments (i.e., district standardized assessments, student work, observational data from a classroom lesson, teacher-student conference notes, etc.), moving discourse through phases such as Nancy Love’s data-driven dialogue (outlined in her 2009 book *Using Data to Improve Learning for All: A Collaborative Inquiry Approach*):

- *Predict* what the data will show.
- *Observe* without judgment based on the data.
- *Go visual* with a means to see patterns and trends.
- *Infer* causes for the results to inform next steps.

They use not only their own assessments as evidence to inform their action steps, they read

professional texts to gain new ideas and strategies to achieve their goal.

Rigorous discourse using student data as evidence might sound like the following: “I notice students were stronger at determining the author’s purpose in the passage on the last assessment than on this assessment. When we specifically compare questions, I notice . . . I’m wondering if this is because the second passage requires students to infer . . .”

Rigorous discourse using an article as evidence might sound like the following: “I connected with the second line in Paragraph 2 [reads the line] because . . .” or “The author’s point seems to be . . . but I’m unsure how that would work with my students,” or “This text makes me think of the demonstration lesson Mrs. J. did last week,” or “The results from this research article align with my own findings that . . .”

Rigorous Discourse Is Dialogic

Discourse by its very name indicates communication between two or more people, but that does not mean the communication is rigorous. Monologic discourse in which one teacher shares specific ideas and the other teachers gain no new insight and do not share their own ideas is not rigorous.

Dialogic discourse, on the other hand, suggests “intellectual openness and possibilities for critique and creative thought,” according to Catherine O’Connor and Sarah Michaels in their 2007 *Human Development* article, “When Is Dialogue Dialogic?” This type of talk is rigorous because it fosters learning and change.

Within a team, there is room for both types of discourse, but to be considered rigorous, it must be dialogic.

Dialogic, rigorous discourse might sound like the following: “I hear your point about implementing that strategy, but in looking over this particular evidence again, I’m thinking that this strategy might not resolve the problem. I’d like to get some ideas on how to adapt it or learn about others.”

Rigorous Discourse Is Culturally Proficient

Teams of teachers huddled over spreadsheets, state test reports, photocopies of student work, and school data may look like professional learning, but it isn’t unless the team members are completely honest about their culture-bound assumptions, inviting multiple perspectives to the conversation.

This means teams do not let unsettling remarks settle. They actively listen for culture-bound

assumptions such as “Johnny comes from a family of very nice, hardworking, blue-collar workers. He’ll be fine in retail, but there is no way he’ll make it in college.” They respectfully question each other’s beliefs, values, and teaching decisions about cultural groups.

They act with a moral responsibility to meet the social and cognitive needs of all students—particularly those who are most often underserved. They engage in difficult conversations from a position of curiosity without attacking colleagues, simultaneously advocating for equity for all students.

Culturally proficient, rigorous discourse might sound like the following: One teacher says, “Why bother talking about student achievement when we know these kids are doing the best they can, given who they are?” Another teacher responds, “What can we do to support our discussions about serving all demographic groups?”

Rigorous Discourse Is Reflective

Discourse without rigor is similar to people mindlessly going through the motions of their morning commute. They are on auto-pilot, making decisions without thoughtful reflection.

For example, a team might realize that 24 students don’t know how to write a topic sentence. The team members commit to teaching students how to write topic sentences. Two weeks later they reassess, and 20 students still can’t write a topic sentence. They conclude that they need to reteach topic sentences.

There is no conversation about how they are teaching topic sentences or for what purpose. No one discusses why the reteaching worked for 4 students but not for the other 20. No one publicly shares how they will change their instructional practice to meet the different needs of their students or how their beliefs about teaching students to be better writers might need to evolve in order to get different results.

Rigorous discourse plunges teachers into consciousness, heightening their awareness of themselves and their instructional practices. They wrestle with what they believe they know as true and what evidence shows to be true.

In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey (2004) contends that people come face-to-face with a “paradigm shift,” where initial ways of thinking, traditional behaviors, and perceptions shift their thinking and actions.

Reflective, rigorous discourse might sound like the following: “I’m thrown off when I see these data because I truly thought that instructional strategy was working.”

Rigorous Discourse Is Actionable

Team members who have an exhilarating, dialogic conversation about what they read in a professional text or see in their data; who are brazenly honest about what they see and hear; who are fully conscious of their own assumptions and contributions to problems; yet who never transform any newly acquired learning into actionable steps for teachers and students fall short of rigorous discourse.

Knowledge gained through simple talk holds little value until it becomes actionable, until educators are capable of applying their learning to their practice, according to Chris Argyris in *Knowledge for Action: A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Organizational Change* (2013). Conversations that yield “a-ha” moments of awareness and knowledge are only valuable if they also change what teachers and students do or recommit them to what they already do with newfound purpose, heightened awareness, vigor, and fidelity.

Actionable, rigorous discourse might sound like the following: “So we have identified a problem of focus and some specific causes and potential strategies that could work. Now let’s set a timeline indicating when we will implement the strategies and when we will assess if those strategies are advancing our goal.”

A Clear Sign

Any time team members look at evidence and suddenly become aware of their own shortcomings; any time a team member squirms at hearing a negative assumption about a student and is compelled to speak; any time a team looks at assessment data and says, “What the heck do we do now?”; and any time team talk translates into actionable knowledge—those are clear signs that the team members are engaging in rigorous discourse. 

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