

Chapter X

Instructional Conversations: Designing Dialogue to Deepen Learning

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ABSTRACT

Instructional conversations lie at the heart of teaching and learning. Well designed instructional conversations stimulate deep thinking, promote critical reflection and meta-cognition, and help participants create meaning and leverage ideas to generate something new. This chapter defines instructional conversations and presents a taxonomy of five types, ranging from dialectic conversations to reflective conversations. Illustrations of each type of conversation are provided, along with a discussion of their function and ways to increase their effectiveness. The chapter ends with a set of suggestions for improving professional practice, and particularly for instructors who wish to become more intentional about reaching learning goals.

INTRODUCTION

Interactions between the instructor and students or among the students themselves are the foundations for learning in most educational settings. Such interactions, whether in person or virtual, are intended to illuminate and share information, identify common vocabulary, process ideas, generate understanding, provide feedback for

clarifying thinking, build knowledge and skills, and develop a sense of group and common culture. These instructional conversations, while predominant in K-12 and higher education settings, are not always intentional, that is, planned and deconstructed in such a way as to guide learning purposefully.

This chapter defines multiple types of instructional conversations and illuminates ways

in which instructors can achieve academic goals more purposefully. These are placed within a taxonomy of knowledge-building conversations that were identified by other researchers (Jenlink & Carr, 1996; Lamy, 1999), and which were observed in the research. Examples of various types of instructional conversations that were used by middle school, university, and adult learners in such diverse content areas as music, physics, language arts, biology, special education, and program assessment, which may serve as a stimulus for further research, are presented. The taxonomy and the examples presented in this chapter may prove useful for researchers and instructors who are capturing and analyzing conversational interactions in an effort to focus on the goals of a class, list, forum, or course, as well as to improve student participation and learning.

WHAT ARE INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATIONS?

The use of student-instructor conversations as an alternative to information transmission via traditional lectures has deep roots, going back as far as Socrates' dialogue with his student, Alexander. In order to qualify as a conversation, a set of verbal or online interchanges among participants must have a kernel of dialogic contributions, features, or moves that result in an exchange of meanings between participants in order to carry out some mutually agreed-upon activity, such as clarifying a difficult concept or designing an action plan, in a specific situation (Wells, 1996). This kernel consists of a combination of three types of moves, referred to as request-respond-reply interactions:

- **Request:** A strongly prospective move, usually posed as a question to be answered or a request for feedback from members of the group or class.

- **Respond:** A less prospective move involving transmission of information, clarification of an idea, suggestion for action, or any other sort of response that may expect, but does not require, a reply.
- **Reply:** A move that occurs in response to one of the other two prospective moves but may not expect any further response.

The reply may be a simple acknowledgment, an evaluation by an instructor, or a comment by a classmate that evokes no further response. Such replies do not extend the conversation. Only when the “reply” move becomes an invitation for further responses do we begin to see the emergence of a “true” instructional conversation or online thread in which student learning builds progressively.

WHAT IS NOT AN INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATION?

A simple request-respond dyad does not constitute a true conversation, though the research shows that it is currently the most frequent type of conversation that occurs in both classrooms today. This was the case in regular classrooms in interactions between students and instructors, between students, or in most message threads on educational forums associated with online learning.

The request-response cycle has some, albeit limited, instructional purposes. A request for information or clarification with a corresponding set of responses from several participants may allow students to explore a knotty issue or concept from multiple perspectives. A set of informal request-respond interactions from a Cornell University physics forum have been captured on the subject of gauge invariance—one of the most difficult concepts in all of elementary particle physics. In the examples of scientific discourse that are presented in this chapter, it is important to concentrate on the form of the messages rather

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